MEANING, TRUTH, AND REFERENCE

IN HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

FRANK ANKERSMIT

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

HISTORY

"In my view, Frank Ankersmit is the most original and important philosopher of history writing today. There is no question but that he knows this field inside out—he seems to have read virtually everything relevant to it. Even more important, he has an original and extremely stimulating perspective on the object of philosophy of history, namely, the human attempt to come to grips with the past. *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* significantly clarifies Ankersmit's views and claims."

—**ALLAN MEGILL**, University of Virginia, author of *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*

In this book, the noted intellectual historian Frank Ankersmit provides a systematic account of the problems of reference, truth, and meaning in historical writing. He works from the conviction that the historicist account of historical writing, associated primarily with Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt, is essentially correct but that its original idealist and romanticist idiom needs to be translated into more modern terms. Rehabilitating historicism for the contemporary philosophy of history, he argues, "reveals the basic truths about the nature of the past itself, how we relate to it, and how we make sense of the past in historical writing."

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Yet surely the question of representation has marked the fundamental break with traditional philosophy, and constituted the source of all the multiple philosophical modernisms.

Fredric Jameson, Valences of the Dialectic

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Preface

Philosophers of language have long appealed to science when addressing the three-pronged issue of reference, truth, and meaning. To be sure, so-called ordinary language philosophers have explored the issue in ways remote from science. But for the others, the clarity, precision, and transparency of science have served as a welcome model by which they might unlock the secrets of language. In this book I shall follow a similar strategy. However, instead of the sciences I will take history and historical representation as my guide. My hope is that an analysis of the historian's language will not only promote a better understanding of history but also add a new chapter to existing philosophy of language and open the eyes of philosophers of language to issues that they have so far remained blind to. Above all is the issue of how to account for a complex reality in terms of a complex text—the paradigmatic achievement of the historian's text.

Historicists such as Ranke and Humboldt were the first to reflect on the nature of historical representation. This book is written on the assumption that their view of the nature of historical representation—as expressed in their so-called doctrine of the historical idea—was basically correct. The present book is mainly an attempt to translate the historicist theory of historical representation into a more contemporary philosophical idiom.

The book consists of three parts. The first three chapters situate the argument of this book against the background of where existing philosophy of history can meaningfully be related to the historicist tradition. The second part—comprising chapters 4 through 7—is the heart of the book. These chapters discuss the role of meaning, truth, and reference in historical representation. They explain (1) that in historical representation meaning is more basic than truth and reference and (2) that this is where the philosophical reflection on the nature of historical representation differs from current philosophy of language ordinarily presenting truth as preceding meaning. Chapters 8 through 11 apply the findings of the preceding chapters to the problems of presence, experience, and subjectivity. Finally, chapter 12 argues

that historicists were right after all in their much-derided claim that political history is the backbone of all historical writing.

The book is meant to present a coherent exposition of what are in my view the main philosophical problems occasioned by "historical writing" (*Geschichtsschreibung*), as different from those arising in the context of "historical research" (*Geschichtsforschung*).[1] What is not discussed in the book I consider of no relevance for a proper understanding of historical writing. In this way the book is also an implicit comment on what is not in it.

I warmly thank Hans Mooij for several most helpful suggestions, the two anonymous readers of the manuscript for Cornell University Press who suggested how to improve my argument, and Anthony Runia and Felix Koch for correcting my English.

Glimmen, June 2011

1. For a discussion of this absolutely basic distinction, see chapter 3, section 5.

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MEANING, TRUTH, AND REFERENCE IN HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

CHAPTER 1

Historicism

1. Introduction

There is one basic assumption underlying this entire book: that the historicist account of historical writing, here associated primarily with the writings of Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt, is basically correct.[1] Two comments should be added right away. First, I shall not argue for this assumption—or rather, the only argument I can offer for it is whatever plausibility there may be to the account of historical writing provided in the pages of all of this book. Second, Ranke and Humboldt's historicism was formulated in the idealist and romanticist idiom of the 1820s and 1830s, which can no longer satisfy us in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Their argument therefore needs to be translated into more contemporary terms. Doing this is a major part of my project in this book.

Historicism, as I will use the term here, is the view that the nature of a thing lies in its history. Think of Johann Gottfried Herder: "What I am is what I have become. Like a tree, I have grown into what I am: The seed was

1. The term "historicism" as used here should therefore be strictly distinguished from how Karl Popper understood the term in his *The Poverty of Historicism* of 1954. There the term stands for speculative philosophies of history as developed, for example, by Kant, Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee. In fact, the rejection of speculative philosophies of history is an essential part of Ranke and Humboldt's conception of historicism.

there, but air, soil, and all the other elements around me had to contribute in order to form the seed, the fruit and the tree."[2] Or think of Ranke: "In all things, at all times, it is the origin that is decisive. The first seed goes on to work continuously throughout the whole process of development, either consciously or unconsciously."[3] Or of Wilhelm Dilthey: "What a man is, only his history can tell him."[4] In all these cases the basic insight is that the present manifestation of a thing—whether a human individual, an epoch, a state or a nation, etc.—is a mere shadow, while only its past can teach us its nature and identity. As Maurice Mandelbaum put it, "Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development."[5]

The implication is that the objects investigated by the historian cannot be defined apart from their history. In history we do not first encounter some object or phenomenon that is given to us and whose nature or identity we can then establish by carefully studying that object's past. Admittedly, this is what it is like in the case of a biography of, say, Louis XV. But think of a history of the Cold War. The Cold War is not like an individual whose history can be written by establishing what happened to that individual between 1710 and 1774. In cases like the Cold War identities follow (from) the writing of history rather than preceding them.

In this way history undoubtedly clashes with how the world and its objects are given to us in daily experience. History is an abstraction[6] from our experience of daily reality no less than science is. Given the definition of historicism adopted here, the relationship between an object and its history is inevitably circular. But this circle is not a vicious one, since the very process of endlessly moving within it is how historical knowledge and truth come into being—as is best exemplified by Dilthey's hermeneutic circle.

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2. "Was ich bin, bin ich geworden. Wie ein Baum bin ich gewachsen; der Keim war da; aber Luft, Erde und alle Elemente, die ich um mich setze, mussten beitragen, den Keim, die Frucht, den Baum zu bilden." J. G. Herder, "Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele," in *Sämmtliche Werke,* ed. B. Suphan and C. Redlich, 33 vols., vol. 8 (Berlin, 1877), 307. Translations are mine.

3. "In allen Dingen, allezeit, kommt es auf den Ursprung an. Der erste Keim wirkt immer fort durch das ganze Wachstum, sei es bewusst oder unbewusst." L. von Ranke, "Historisch-politische Zeitschrift," in *Sämmtliche Werke,* 54 vols., vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1867), 345.

4. "Was der Mensch sei, sagt ihm nur seine Geschichte." W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 8 (Stuttgart, 1957), 226.

5. M. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason* (Baltimore, 1971), 42.

6. When using the term "abstraction" I do not wish to imply that history should come "later" than our experience of daily reality. In fact, as we shall see, in chapter 7, history precedes it.

Understood in this way, historicism is the historian's counterpart to the scientist's scientism. According to the scientistic view only *science* can give us reliable knowledge of objects in the world—and insofar as something's history has any relevance at all, it can be inferred from what that thing is *presently* like, as geologists can infer the earth's history from its present state. Clearly this is the exact opposite of the historicist view that a thing's present nature (or identity) can be established by only studying its history. An obvious objection would seem to be that (1) both history and geology or astronomy rely on evidence, and (2) that in both cases the evidence is given here and now. Therefore, with respect to the inference from evidence to theory, there should be no difference between the two types of disciplines. The equally obvious rejoinder is that the issue of the inference from evidence is then considered irrelevant to the present problematic.[7] However, historicism and scientism are, at bottom, ontological positions, and these cannot be assessed on the basis of epistemological considerations about the uses of evidence—unless, that is, one were to embrace the idea that epistemology determines ontology. But in that case, upholding the compatibility of history and science would rely on the premise that the mere fact that evidence is given here and now rules out any interesting epistemological differences between different disciplines. This assumption is sufficiently dogmatic to deserve no further discussion here.[8]

Two conclusions follow from this. First, historicism and scientism are mutually exclusive: one cannot consistently embrace both of them at one and the same time—although at different times one could (and even should).

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7. The point was well made by Cassirer: "If we wanted to describe this distinction [between scientific and historical thought] it would not be enough to say that the scientist has to do with present objects whereas the historian has to do with past objects. Such a distinction would be misleading. The scientist may very well, like the historian, inquire into the remote origins of things. . . . Historical objects have no separate and self-contained reality; they are embodied in physical objects. But in spite of this embodiment they belong, so to speak, to a higher dimension. What we call the historic sense does not change the shape of things, nor does it detect in them a new quality. But it gives to things and events a new depth. When the scientist wishes to go back into the past he employs no concepts and categories but those of his observation of the present. He studies in the present the material traces left by the past. History too has to begin with these traces, for without them it could take no single step. But this is only a first and preliminary task. To this actual empirical reconstruction history adds a symbolic reconstruction." See E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1970), 176, 177.

8. The symmetry of history on the one hand and geology and astronomy on the other would make sense, however, if one were to reduce history to historical research only and remove from it the dimension of historical writing. For the latter is where the production of the historicist identity of things takes place and where the asymmetry between history and science comes into being.

Second, no historian can avoid subscribing to historicism. For what could possibly be the purpose of his activity if he rejected the historicist claim that a thing's nature or identity lies in its past? Without it, there would be no sense or meaning to the historian's efforts.

Historicism, as just defined, was a German invention. Its diffusion outside Germany was never easy or spontaneous.[9] Resistance against it has always been strongest in the Anglophone intellectual world. To be sure the abyss between Germany and England is by no means unbridgeable. In fact, almost a century before Herder's triumphant annunciation of the historicist conception of the human individual quoted above, John Locke had already made much the same point.[10] Nevertheless, it is as though Anglo-American thought had always remained protected by some intellectual Teflon coating against any real interaction with historicism, so that only a "light" variant of historicism was able to find its way into the Anglo-American mind.[11]

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9. Much the same is true of the philosophy of history. Recall the long line of eminent German historians and philosophers (of history) reflecting on the nature of historical writing and on how we relate to the past: Möser, Herder, Kant, Schleiermacher, Schiller, Goethe, Schlegel, Görres, Hölderlin, Hegel, Niebuhr, Savigny, Feuerbach, Marx, Ranke, Humboldt, Droysen, Burckhardt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Windelband, Mommsen, Rickert, Lamprecht, Troeltsch, Weber, Meinecke and, finally, Gadamer, in whose work this long and venerable tradition found its impressive point of culmination. And these are only the first names to come to mind. The Anglophone tradition can boast of a Buckle, Bradley, McTaggart, Lord Acton, Collingwood, and Oakeshott only. But nowadays the situation is the reverse. The philosophy of history has gone out of fashion in Germany, though quite a lot of excellent work is still being done there on the history of historical writing. The philosophy of history now has its home in the Anglophone world, thanks mainly to Collingwood, who acted as a kind of *trait d'union* between German (and Italian) philosophy of history on the one hand and its contemporary practitioners in the Anglophone world on the other. Without Collingwood the discipline might well be dead by now and we should be profoundly grateful to him for having prevented the discipline's premature death. Nevertheless, a price had to be paid for this. Not being able to read German, Collingwood had an only rudimentary grasp of what had been achieved by German philosophers of history. And since most Anglophone philosophers of history have come to the discipline via Collingwood, several of the latter's blind spots were unfortunately passed on to the contemporary Anglophone philosophy of history. Above all because Collingwood's writings are the Anglophone philosopher of history's customary introduction to the discipline's main problems. As the Latin proverb has it, *Quo simul est inbuta recens, servabit odorem testa diu.*

10. John Perry summarizes Locke's account of personal identity (in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690) as follows: "Person-stages belong to the same person, if and only if the later could contain an experience which is a memory of a reflective awareness of an experience contained in the earlier." See Perry, "The Problem of Personal Identity," in *Personal Identity,* ed. J. Perry (Berkeley, 1975), 15. So memory—the awareness of one's history—is seen as constitutive of personal identity, hence of the person one is (as was the case with St. Augustine's *sum qui memini*). This comes close to the historicist account of identity. From the perspective of the rest of this book it should be observed, however, that Locke's statement was epistemological rather than ontological, whereas the founding fathers of historicism preferred to argue in the other direction.

11. A telling example is the lengthy entry on historicism in a recent encyclopedia on historical thought, which promotes the scientistic approach to historical writing characteristic of Anglo-Saxon

2. Historicism and Neo-Kantianism

One should not infer from what I have just said that the predominance of the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition was responsible for the demise of historicism. For historicism was already fatally wounded before it made its entry into the Anglophone world.[12]

Here we should think, to begin with, of the so-called crisis of historicism. That crisis resulted from the head-on collision of historicism with the neo-Kantianism in vogue in most German universities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Most varieties of neo-Kantianism had inherited from Kant the conviction that values must be eternally valid in order to have the authority to guide us in our moral dilemmas. This is clearly at odds with what history has on offer. This dilemma caused a profound and almost existential despair in the minds of neo-Kantian philosophers and of theologians, such as Ernst Troeltsch, who were hoping for absolute and time-transcendent moral and theological truths. Not surprisingly, historicism was accused of being the source of the neo-Kantians' discomforts.

Three comments are in order. First, any historian, whether historicist or not, will recognize that no (moral) values have been accepted as valid for all times and places. So if the neo-Kantian and the theologian decide to remain stubbornly blind to this unpleasant fact, and if they wish to avoid any future exposure to it, they will have to abolish or discredit *all* of historical writing as well—and not just historicism.[13] Second, if there is indeed such a conflict between plain historical fact and the neo-Kantian's dream of eternal moral truths, had we not better awaken from this dream? What is the use of hoping for something that will never be given to you? Third, and most important, it is not part of the very concept of norms and values that they should be universally valid. Only moral philosophers with a background in natural law thinking or committed to a more orthodox formulation of the Kantian

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philosophy. The entry does not even mention the definition of historicism proposed just now. See R. D'Amico, "Historicism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography,* ed. A. Tucker (Oxford, 2009), 243–253.

12. Historicism did continue to be discussed in Germany, however. In the last few decades the main protagonists in the German discussion have been Jörn Rüsen and Otto Gerhard Oexle. However, this discussion focused mainly on what historicism *was,* whereas little attention has been paid to the question of what it may have to contribute to current and future intellectual debates. In this respect, historicism is now dead in the country where it was born. For an erudite and most instructive survey of this complex and sometimes confusing German debate, see I. Veit-Brause, "Eine Disziplin rekonstruiert ihre Geschichte: Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft in den 90er Jahren (I)," *Neue Politische Literatur. Jg.* 43 (1998): 36–66.

13. See my "Een moderne verdediging van het historisme," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 96 (1981): 453–475.

categorical imperative will believe otherwise.[14] Paraphrasing H. L. A. Hart's explanation of legal rules, we might argue that moral rules are "rules for action" and, next, that these rules will depend on the kind of social order they are meant to regulate. Each epoch has its own set of such time-specific rules and is in need of them. If one were to apply, for example, the prevalent social norms of the Middle Ages to our own time, chaos would result and vice versa. As moral beings we are historically conditioned, and indeed we should rejoice in this. For it is precisely this fact that enables us to cope in a more or less successful way with the complexities of the social order we happen to live in. Of course, the historicity of norms and values is by no means incompatible with rational criticism of them. On the contrary, reason may unite and guide us in our debates about what moral order we prefer and how to achieve it. From this perspective, the crisis of historicism was much ado about nothing, and one can only be amazed that historicists surrendered to their neo-Kantian opponents so easily and effortlessly.

But there is a more interesting dimension to the conflict between historicism and neo-Kantianism. Neo-Kantianism did not long survive its victory over historicism. In fact, a story can be told implying that, in the end, it was not neo-Kantianism but historicism that had the last word. Heidegger is the main protagonist of this story, as told by Ingo Farin in a recent article. Farin's story goes like this.[15] When neo-Kantians like Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert attempted to distinguish history from the sciences, they increasingly tended to exchange traditional Kantian epistemological arguments for ontological ones. Thus Farin: "Although Windelband fails to reflect on the implications of his actual insights, we can certainly see that the categories of the idiographic sciences that he upholds—*the event, the particular, the factual*—turn out to be ontological categories of human life as such. Whereas Kant linked 'the human standpoint' to empirical reality under the laws of the understanding."[16] Much the same is true of Rickert. Farin then demonstrates that the early Heidegger made explicit what had remained only implicit in the writings of his neo-Kantian teachers.

But there was a peculiarity in his attempt to do so that would have the most far-reaching consequences. As will be clear from the quote from Farin,

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14. In spite of his advocacy of legal positivism, Kelsen always remained sympathetic toward neo-Kantianism. It is all the more striking that few theorists have been as effective in defusing the Kantian categorical imperative as Kelsen was in his *Was ist Gerechtigkeit? Nachwort von Robert Walter* (Stuttgart, 2000).

15. I owe the plot of this story to I. Farin. See I. Farin, "Early Heidegger's Concept of History in the Light of the Neo-Kantians," *Journal of Philosophy of History* 4 (2010): 1–30.

16. Ibid., 8, 9.

two things were at stake in the gradual dissolution of neo-Kantianism as occasioned by the problem of history. In the first place there was that "focus on the event, the particular, the factual," which had moved Heidegger to concentrate on how the individual human being experiences his or her life. A case in point is his "trial lecture" of 1915. Next there was the much more revolutionary exchange of epistemology for ontology that we ordinarily associate with Heidegger's role in modern Western philosophy. Needless to say, these are two fundamentally different issues, and adopting one of them does not compel us to embrace the other as well. But since both were the result of Heidegger's early skirmishes with neo-Kantianism, he himself tended to link them together. The momentous consequence was that when Heidegger came to advocate in the run-up to *Sein und Zeit,* the exchange of epistemology for ontology, ontology was indissolubly linked to *the individual's* experience of his life-world. An earlier phase in Heidegger's intellectual development thus became the prison house for his later thought.

The paradoxical upshot of all this was that with the triumph of Heidegger's philosophy over a tired and timeworn neo-Kantianism, historicism saw its unexpected final victory over its former enemy. But the price it paid for this was that history was now restricted to the narrow confines of the individual human being. This rendered historicism's final victory over neo-Kantianism useless for the purposes of historical writing. For as T. W. Adorno was quick to point out, it would be wholly impossible to write history within the philosophical parameters of *Sein und Zeit.*[17]

The moral of the story just recounted is that the exchange of an epistemological neo-Kantian account of historicity for an ontological account need not be accompanied by a restriction to the sphere of the human individual. The decision to do so resulted from an unfortunate contingency in Heidegger's intellectual biography. The question whether Heidegger's ontological turn can meaningfully be related to historical writing as it has been practiced since Ranke's days is therefore still very much on the agenda.

3. Rorty on Heidegger and Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of Language

So let us address that question. To begin with, recall that Heidegger's charge against (neo-)Kantian epistemology was basically that its idea of a subject

17. T. W. Adorno, "Negative Dialektik," in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 135.

acquiring knowledge of the world from its transcendental vantage point does not capture how we in fact relate to the world. It is a philosopher's pipe dream. We ourselves are already part of that world and cannot isolate ourselves from it in the way suggested by Kantian transcendentalism. Furthermore, that world is to be conceived as an essentially *historical* world. This claim was, of course, the basis of Heidegger's critique of (neo-)Kantian epistemology and of his *Existenz-Philosophie.*

In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty argued most surprisingly that Heidegger's case against (neo-)Kantianism found a close analogue in recent developments within Anglo-American philosophy of science. Willard Quine's attack on the two dogmas of empiricism and his resulting holism[18] had also had the effect of severing the clear ties between knowledge and the world that traditional epistemology sought to vindicate. This development culminated in Donald Davidson's seminal essay "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," which rejected the (characteristically epistemological) claim that there must be some preexisting scheme that would allow us to determine how knowledge (or language) and its referents are related in general, as well as in particular cases.[19] But there is no such scheme that would assign bits of knowledge or language, on the one hand, to lumps of reality, on the other. And this meant the end of epistemology.

Insights like these lent themselves to being interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it could be argued that knowledge and language now possessed a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the world. This interpretation came to be known as "the linguistic turn." On the other hand, the critique of epistemology could be interpreted as an attack on the notion reference, or, as Quine put it, as the recognition of "the inscrutability of reference." Rorty embraced *both* interpretations and, as I pointed out, insisted on how similar they were to the way in which Heidegger had disposed of (neo-)Kantian transcendentalism and epistemology.

But against the background of what I said earlier, it can be argued that Rorty's picture left out an important aspect of the whole story. I have in mind the fact that what had led Heidegger to his ontological and antiepistemologi-

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18. In Quine's view, our theories do not face factual evidence "piecemeal" but only "wholesale." Both Quine himself and his disciples inferred from this a holistic conception of language that seemed to dovetail nicely with the holism we always associate with historicism. But it would require closer inquiry to find out whether Quine's and historicist holism are ultimately the same. I have my doubts about this. Holism in the sciences concerns matters of truth, whereas in history it concerns matters of meaning.

19. D. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1985), 183–199.

cal program was a reflection on *history* and on how it differs from the sciences. Admittedly, when at the end of his book he presented Gadamerian hermeneutics as the remaining contender after the demise of epistemology, Rorty was clearly aware of why history should be at the center of the philosopher's interest after Heidegger and Quine and Davidson. But in his later work Rorty never showed any interest in history or the philosophy of history.[20] Needless to say, his marginalization of history was in line with all the antihistoricist tendencies of twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy of language.[21]

Perhaps the reason it was so easy for Rorty to forget about history was that Heidegger wrote so very little to remind him of it. As we saw above, Heidegger had reduced the realm of historicity to how the individual relates to the world around him. This was still a legacy of (neo-)Kantianism insofar as Heidegger's focus on the individual reflected the (neo-)Kantian's epistemological concern with how the individual transcendental subject can have knowledge of the world.[22] This may explain why historicity survived in Heidegger's *Existenz-Philosophie* in a form that was of so little use for historians and the historical profession. For historians are primarily interested in what happens not *in* but *between* individuals.

To sum up, Rorty succeeded in tying the present state and the future fate of post-Quinean and post-Davidsonian Anglophone philosophy of language to Heidegger. Both meet each other in their shared rejection of epistemology and of the notion of reference. Rorty inferred from this state of affairs that

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20. See chapter 6.

21. As always, there are exceptions to this rule. One should, in this context, think primarily of the impressive oeuvre of Joseph Margolis and, especially, his *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford, 1991); *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science* (Berkeley, 1993), and *Historied Thought, Constructed World: A Conceptual Primer for the Turn of the Millennium* (Berkeley, 1995). However, Margolis's historicism has its origins in a reflection on science; hence its tendency to downplay the differences between science and history. This is at odds, of course, with the historicism under discussion here, which focuses on what separates the sciences from the humanities and from history. Put differently, the fact that science has its history no less than the nation or a civilization is insufficient argument for a rapprochement between the sciences and history.

Speaking more generally, if one approaches historicism from the direction of the sciences, one will perceive only a shadow of it. All the drama of historicism and all the challenges it poses are retained and can receive justice only if one remains constantly aware of its roots in the human life world (*Lebenswelt*). And then history is the only discipline that can guide us and keep us on the right track.

22. Of course, it is one of the peculiarities of the Kantian system that the *individual* transcendental subject is, at the same time, a *universal* transcendental subject. As Frederick Beiser put it, "[T]he form of experience is created by me, so that all appearances are only appearances 'for me.' Of course, the 'I' in question here is not my personal and private self but my impersonal and public self (whoever that is); and these appearances are still intersubjective in the sense that they have a universal and necessary *validity* in conforming to the norms of the understanding, which hold for all human beings." See F. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism 1781–1801* (Cambridge, 2002), 151.

Heidegger's focus on historicity would provide Anglophone philosophy of language with a new agenda. However, by a momentous coincidence, Heidegger's interest in historicity failed to tally with what actually happens in historical writing. That, in turn, has left its traces in Western philosophy since Heidegger, both continental and Anglo-American, down to the present day. So we are now in need of a more satisfactory conception of historicity in order to make Rorty's dreams of a new agenda for philosophy of language come true. And this will require us to return to the tradition of German historicism.

4. The Historicist Account of Historical Change

Karl Mannheim correctly observed that the revolution effected by historicism was to exchange a static conception of society for a dynamic one.[23] Not standstill but change was now conceived as the "normal" situation. This will not surprise us, of course, if we recall the historicist thesis that phenomena are defined by their place in a process of development or change.[24] Moreover, historicism did not hesitate to radicalize this idea in such a way that no aspect of a phenomenon was supposed to remain exempt from change. This raised the difficult problem of what might then count as the subject of change. When attributing change to an object, we ordinarily assume some of the object's aspect(s) to remain unchanged in the process of change. When you paint white a chair that used to be brown, the chair can unproblematically count as the subject of change, since we would all agree that after having been painted, it is still the same chair as before. Generally speaking, objects in the world will be unproblematic subjects of change as long as we can reasonably claim them to be the same object before and after change. But if change is radicalized in the way envisioned by historicism, what can then still count as its unchanging subject?[25]

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23. "Der Historismus ist also kein Einfall, er ist keine Mode, er ist nicht einmal eine Strömung, er ist das Fundament, von dem aus wir die gesellschaftlich-kulturelle Wirklichkeit betrachten. Er ist nicht ausgeklügelt, er ist kein Programm, er ist der organisch gewordene Boden, die Weltanschauung selbst, die sich herausbildete, nachdem das religiös gebundene Weltbild des Mittelalters und nachdem das aus ihm säcularisierte Weltbild der Aufklärung mit dem Grundgedanken einer überzeitlichen Vernunft sich selbst aufgehoben hatte." See K. Mannheim, "Historismus," in *Wissenssoziologie* (Neuwied am Rhein, 1970), 246, 247.

24. Recall the argument in the introduction to this chapter about the circularity of the relationship between a thing and its history according to historicism: there is no specific "place" in this circle where we may enter it in order to fix that relationship once and for all. This epitomizes how the subject of change is problematized in historicism.

25. For an elaboration of this admittedly quite schematic account, see F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (Dordrecht, 1983), 120–134 and Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), chap. 4.

Historicists themselves wrestled with this problem. Herder proposed to discern in historical phenomena a quasi-Aristotelian entelechy, a principle determining change but itself exempt from it. Think of the entelechy determining how a puny acorn grows into a mighty oak (his favorite metaphor for all things historical, as we saw above). Herder's suggestion had the disadvantage that entelechies are always species-specific and thus generic, which is at odds with the historicist's insistence on individuality and uniqueness. But this problem was solved with the notion of the "historical idea," as proposed by Ranke and Humboldt: each historical "thing" (a nation, epoch, civilization, etc.) is argued to possess a historical idea, an entelechy, so to speak—wholly specific to that thing alone, which is not in turn subject to change.[26] Ranke and Humboldt made the following claims about the historical idea.

First, no philosophical analysis or deductive argument will ever present us with a historical idea. Only the most careful and scrupulous empirical historical research of documents and of whatever other traces the past has left us can tell us how to conceive of the historical idea for any particular topic of investigation. Such proposals will continuously be revised on the basis of new evidence that results in better insights. Hence historicism's relentless promotion of the professionalization of history.

Second, a nation's or an epoch's historical idea expresses what is unique about or characteristic of it (think of what we associate with terms like "the Renaissance" or "the Enlightenment"). And what is unique to or characteristic of it is its "essence," or its identity, which is best captured by its history, by an account of how it came into being.

Third, by presenting a nation's or an epoch's historical idea the historian has, in a way, *explained* its history. The historical idea is, basically, a claim about how a nation's or an epoch's most important features hang together. Think again of how a concept like "the Enlightenment" succeeds in imparting meaning to an infinity of phenomena of eighteenth-century Europe and thus in explaining them. Historical phenomena are explained by relating them to the historical idea that defines a nation's or an epoch's uniqueness or identity, just as we may explain a person's actions by relating them to his character. This is why the table of contents of this book enumerates practically all the problems traditionally discussed in the philosophy of history—with the sole exception of the topic of historical explanation. For in the historicist view, the issue of explanation is coextensive with that

26. The relevant texts of Humboldt and Ranke have been translated into English; see L. von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. G. G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis, 1973).

of representation: once clarity has been achieved with regard to historical representation, no substantial questions remain to be asked with regard to historical explanation.

Fourth, Humboldt explicitly leaves room for causal explanation apart from explanation in terms of historical ideas. But he is no less explicit about the hierarchy between them: the former is always subservient to the latter. Causal relationships obtain between what are merely the *components* of a nation's or an epoch's essence or identity, whereas the historical idea expresses this essence or identity *itself.*

And indeed, much of the practice of historical writing can be fitted within the framework provided by these four claims about the historical idea.

5. The Truth about the Historicist's Historical Ideas

Nevertheless, no contemporary historian or philosopher of history will be prepared to agree with Ranke's and Humboldt's notion of the historical idea. Instead, it will be declared redundant. For it amounts to placing between the past to be explained and its explanation in and by the historical text a third entity—that is, the historical idea, which has no actual work to do within the explanatory process. Historians seek to explain past objects. They do not additionally seek to explain historical ideas that would correspond to those objects and that allegedly exist apart from them and yet in the past itself, determining in some mysterious way their trajectory through historical time. We should therefore completely abandon the historical idea as so much excess baggage; it is simply one more Wittgensteinian wheel in the explanatory machine "that can be turned though nothing else moves with it."[27]

But it is crucial to notice that one may agree with this criticism of the historicist's historical idea while disagreeing with the grounds on which it is made. The claim that the historical idea is a redundancy and therefore best disposed of appeals to the argument that its postulation violates the requirement that there should be nothing in historical language that lacks a counterpart in historical reality and vice versa. According to this line of thought, as soon as we fall afoul of this (realist) parallelism of language and reality, redundancies will make their entry, either in the past itself (as is the case with the historical idea) or in the historian's language (as in speculative philosophy of history).

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27. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* translated G. E. M Anscombe (Oxford, 1974), para. 271.

However, this neat and comforting picture of the parallelism of language and reality is false. Recall here Mink's argument against the belief in what he called "Universal History," which he defined as "the idea that there is a determinate historical reality, the complex referent for all our narratives of 'what actually happened,' the untold story to which narrative histories approximate."[28] However, as Mink went on to point out, the past itself is not an "untold story" against which we could check the reliability of all the stories historians tell about it. "Stories are not lived, but told," as his well-known formula goes; stories are found not in the past itself but only in the books and articles that historians write about it. So Mink grants to stories—to historical narrative—an autonomy that disrupts the realist's parallelism thesis.[29]

And so it is with the historicist's historical idea. We should not locate it in the past itself—as the historicists mistakenly did themselves—nor should we reject it as a redundancy offending our realist belief in a parallelism of language and reality.[30] Instead we must situate it in the historian's language about the past. It is not an entelechy determining the temporal development of historical objects but rather the principle structuring the historian's stories of the past. Moreover, we must avoid the assumption that the past itself contains some real counterpart to this structuring principle. To think so would be to return to the parallelism thesis that Mink so convincingly rejected with his attack on the dogma of Universal History. This attack is, in fact, an exact analogue (with respect to historical writing) of Davidson's well-known attack on "the very idea of a conceptual scheme"—already mentioned above. Davidson rejected the assumption—presupposed in almost all of epistemology—that there must be some conceptual scheme or system encompassing both language and the world in terms of which we can define how language and the world hang together.[31] The dogma of Universal History is in fact the historical (not historicist!) correlate of the notion of a conceptual scheme, since it claims that there is a" history" (constituted by the past itself) from which each individual historical representation is a more or

28. L. O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in Mink, *Historical Understanding*, ed. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca, 1987), 202.

29. For a further discussion of Mink's views, see chapter 2, sections 5 and 6.

30. As was recognized by Huizinga when characterizing the historicist doctrine of the historical ideas as both "indispensable and inevitable" for a proper understanding of the writing of history. See J. Huizinga, "De wetenschap der geschiedenis," in *Verzamelde Werken*, vol. 7 (Haarlem, 1950), 135. In the section Huizinga devotes to the historical idea, he strikes a careful balance between nominalism and realism: nominalism is the basic truth about the historical idea—and this is where Huizinga distances himself from historicists such as Ranke. Nevertheless, the historical idea enables us to orient ourselves in historical reality—and this is its realist moment. See ibid., 139.

31. See my *Narrative Logic*, chapter 4, for a similar argument about the historian's language.

less helpful quotation. But in fact there is no such Universal History, and this affords historical representation an autonomy with regard to the past that is impossible to accommodate within any version of historical epistemology.

Once we locate the historical idea in the historian's discourse, what historicists like Ranke and Humboldt say about the historical idea suddenly falls into place. Yes, in history the focus is on the individual, since each historical text has its own individuality. Yes, *individuum est ineffabile* since the historical text's individuality can never be exhaustively defined.[32] Yes, history always has to do with development, since this is the essential property of historical narratives. Yes, the historicist's main claim that a thing's history is in its past is correct, for its nature or identity is defined by a historical narrative. Yes, we have good reason to be skeptical about efforts to translate history into a science as long as there is no science of historical texts. Yes, presenting a past object's historical idea may *explain* that object, because the narratives structured by the historical idea possess explanatory power. And, finally, yes, the historian's breath permeates the past as presented by him, in much the same way that the pantheist God is present in His creation. So Meinecke, as presented by Krol,[33] was right about this latter point.

6. Dialectics

Having arrived at this stage, I wish to say a few sympathetic things about dialectics. The urge to do so may surprise for two reasons. In the first place, apart from some Hegelian and Marxist diehards, few philosophers nowadays will be ready to take dialectics seriously. In the second place, dialectics will be immediately associated—and for good reason—with Hegel's and Marx's speculative philosophies and thus with an approach to the philosophy of history that we diagnosed with Mink as the most fatal symptom of the Universal History disease. On the other hand, speculative philosophers have been no less sensitive to the demands of history than have historicists such as Ranke and Humboldt. Moreover, there has been a considerable amount of border traffic between both. Think of Johann Gustav Droysen's profoundly Hegelian notion of the *sittliche Mächte.* Even Ranke's own optimist view of

32. I have in mind here the intertextualist claim that the meaning of a text about a given subject is always codetermined by other texts about that subject. Since new items can always be added to this set of other texts, a text's meaning can never be fixed once and for all. For further elaboration of this claim, see my "Reply to Professor Zagorin," *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 283 ff.

33. R. A. Krol, "Friedrich Meinecke: Pantheism and the Crisis of Historicism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4 (2010): 195–210.

the course of Western history did in the end not differ much from how his great antagonist, Hegel, read it. So historicism and speculative philosophy of history seem to be scions of the same stem and to be more intimately interrelated than is often believed to be the case.[34]

For a proper understanding of dialectics we shall have to go back to the reaction to Kant's critical philosophy. The impact of Kant's writings was immense and led most German philosophers at the time in one way or another to assimilate his transcendentalism. But others remained skeptical. Some of Kant's readers resented the insurmountable gap between subject and object (or between language and the world, to put it in a more contemporary vocabulary) that resulted from his distinction between noumenal and phenomenal reality. Others even went so far as to say that in the Kantian system knowledge no longer has a *fundamentum in re* and therefore agreed with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in accusing Kant of "nihilism" (Jacobi introduced that term into philosophical discourse). Kantian transcendentalism, it was argued, had robbed even our most elementary certainties of their foundations. So the need was felt to somehow bridge again the gap that Kantian critical philosophy had so irresponsibly (and doubtless unintentionally) created.[35]

All this culminated in the so-called *Pantheismusstreit*—one of the greatest debates in all of the history of philosophy, and one in which almost every German philosopher of that time participated. It was triggered by a book by Jacobi published in 1785,[36] in which he claimed that Lessing had confessed to him, shortly before his death, that he had been a disciple of Spinoza all his life. Though Jacobi had probably intended only to attract attention to himself with this most improper indiscretion, the book came as a tremen-

34. Moreover, what is nowadays known as "world history," focusing on the interaction between the human species and its natural environment, clearly takes up again the challenges of speculative philosophy of history. Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit. Vier Theile* (Riga 1785–1791) is of special interest in this context. Herder's book was on world history, as just defined. At the same time both historicists and speculative philosophers could claim Herder as their intellectual ancestor. So he could be seen as the "stem" from which these two "scions" sprouted. And it would follow, furthermore, that world history takes us back to a point prior to the parting of the ways between historicism and speculative philosophy of history.

35. But Kant took no criticism of his work more seriously than the one expressed by Jacobi. For a discussion of the Kant/Jacobi debate and for how it foreshadows the contemporary debate between the adherents of what Rorty had referred to as "impure" and "pure" philosophy of language, see F. R. Ankersmit, "Jacobi: Realist, Romanticist, and Beacon for our Time," *Common Knowledge* 14 (Spring 2008): 221–244.

36. F. H. Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau, 1785).

dous shock. That need not surprise us if we recall that Lessing had been the universally recognized godfather of the German Enlightenment, whereas Spinoza was still no less a *nomen nefandum* than he had been a century before.

Of interest in this context is, above all, that many German philosophers suddenly realized themselves that Spinoza's monism was the solution to the subject/object dualism and related problems raised by Kantian critical philosophy. In the Spinozist system subject and object are both emanations of the One Substance—*Deus sive Natura*. So this system reunited subject and object and broke down again the insurmountable barriers Kant had so elaborately built up between the two. The system of one of the most prominent Spinozists—Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling—was even described as "identity philosophy" because it argued for the "identity" of subject and object, of mind and nature.[37] Above all, the philosophers associated with the emergence of dialectics some ten years later—Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel, and, again, Schelling—saw in Spinozism the effective answer to the challenges of Kantianism. This, then, is the context within which the rehabilitation of Spinoza in late-eighteenth- century Germany was situated.

It goes without saying that from the perspective of the sciences, the Spinozist conception of the One Substance, in which the subject and the object are both contained, is far less plausible than Kant's subject/object split. From whatever angle one looks at it, the idea that the physicist and the atoms and molecules he studies are part of one whole is as trivially true as it is useless for the practice of physics. So the philosopher reflecting on the nature of scientific knowledge will feel far more sympathy for Kant than for Spinoza—whatever reservations he may have about the details of the Kantian system.

But this is strikingly different in the humanities. It makes eminent sense to say that both the subject (the historian) and his object (the past) belong to one historical world. This basic thought was the source of inspiration for all of hermeneutics from Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher down to Hans Georg Gadamer. To mention just one aspect: in historical inquiry it is impossible to clearly demarcate the subject (the historian or, more generally, anyone living in the present) from the object (the past). Think of Freud's "superego," which he so poignantly described in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* as "a garrison in a conquered city."[38] Similarly, we all have many norms, values,

37. H. Schippers, "Natur," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. O. Brunner, W. Conze, and R. Koselleck, vol. 4 (Stuttgart, 2004), 237.

38. S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York, 1961), 71. The same metaphor had already been used by Max Stirner: "Protestantism has actually put a man in the condition of a country governed by secret police. The spy and eavesdropper, 'conscience,' watches over every motion of the

prejudices, traditions, and so on in our heads that we often believe are the heart of our personalities, whereas we all know at the same time that it was "the past" that put all these nice (and sometimes less nice) things into our minds. What, then, are the subject (we) and the object (the past)? Where exactly does one end and the other begin? Can you determine where your superego ends and your ego begins? It is impossible to tell. Worse still, any effort to discover the boundary will disturb it.

This is why all of a sudden Spinoza became the hero of Herder and Goethe and so many others, and why the Spinozist formula of the *εν και παν* could in just a few years become the slogan of the age, even finding its way into the poetry albums in which schoolboys and students explained their feelings to each other. Above all, it endowed the historicism that gradually came into being in Germany around that time with a much firmer and wider basis than Giambattista Vico's *verum et factum convertuntur* could ever have done. It is true that Vico's doctrine that we can come to a true and adequate understanding only of what we have made ourselves—that is, the historical world—comes down to much the same as late-eighteenth-century Spinozist identity philosophy, rejecting any insurmountable barriers between subject and object (whether of Kantian origin or inspired by protoscientistic intuitions). But Vico remained an isolated genius in faraway Naples, whereas the rebirth of Spinozism was taken up in all the intellectual whirls occasioned by Kant's critical philosophy.

So dialectics was born under the aegis of Spinozism. Indeed, the Spinozism of three main architects of dialectics—Hölderlin,[39] Schelling,[40] and

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mind, and all thought and action is for it a 'matter of conscience,' that is police business. This tearing apart of man into 'natural impulses' and 'conscience' (inner populace and inner police) is what constitutes the Protestant." See M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own,* ed. David Leopold (Cambridge, 1995), 82. And one could even go back to Adam Smith: "When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or to condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and the judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavor to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second person is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of. But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that cause should, in every respect, be the same with the effect." See A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), 113.

39. For Hölderlin's Spinozism, see the immensely erudite M. Wegenast, *Hölderlins Spinoza-Rezeption und ihre Bedeutung für die Konzeption des "Hyperion"* (Tübingen, 1990).

40. Thus Schelling announced to Hegel triumphantly in a letter of 1795, "[I]ch bin indessen ein Spinozist geworden!"

Hegel—is well attested. With regard to Hegel one may think of the statement in his *History of Philosophy:* "When one begins to philosophize one must be first a Spinozist. The soul must bathe itself in the aether of the single substance, in which everything one has held dear is submerged."[41] Frederick Beiser is quite explicit about what Hegel had learned from Spinoza and why we will lose sight of the main thrust of his system if we fail to recognize his Spinozism:

> Hegel greatly admired Spinoza for his monism, for showing how to overcome dualism when Kant, Fichte and Jacobi had only reinstated it. True to Spinoza, [his] principle of subject-object identity essentially means that the subjective and the objective, the intellectual and the empirical, the ideal and the real—however one formulates the opposition—are not distinct substances, but simply different aspects, properties or attributes of one and the same substance.[42]

However, Hegel added something of the greatest importance to Spinozism, in which we may rightly recognize his genius as a philosopher. Spinoza's system still is completely static. Hegel took that system into his hands and gave it a tremendous kick, so to speak, so that all the purely logical and timeless relationships in Spinoza's *Ethica* now became relationships unfolding over time. This modification is what made Hegel one of the greatest thinkers on history and time.

Three comments may clarify what kick it was exactly that Hegel imparted to the Spinozist system. In the first place, he courageously transformed the Kantian split between subject and object, or between language and the world, from a handicap into an advantage. Far from acquiescing in their separation, Hegel's dialectics puts all the emphasis on their continuous interaction. And he is as radical in this as he could possibly be. He requires us to banish from our minds all the reminiscences we may still have of a subject (or language) in search for knowledge of objects (things, the world). That does not mean that knowledge is impossible according to Hegel—far from it!—but rather that the kind of knowledge he has in mind is not of the "subject-having-knowledge-of-an-object" type. Instead, knowledge is for Hegel the result of a *dialectical* process, as described and analyzed by a *dialectic* between what we have a sad but ineradicable tendency to call "subject" and "object"—terms that we should always immediately place *sous rature* after having used them.

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41. Quoted in F. Beiser, *Hegel* (New York, 2005), 46, 47.
42. Ibid., 64.

For Hegel there is not a domain of the subject and language, on the one hand, and one of the object and material things, on the other.[43]

It is, therefore, profoundly mistaken to attack Hegel's dialectics with the argument that it should sin against the rules of logic. As Charles Taylor puts it, Hegel favors "a way of thinking which can be called dialectical in that it presents us with something which cannot be grasped in a single proposition or series of propositions which does not violate the principle of non-contradiction."[44] Thinking, for Hegel, can never sever its ties with the world—as typically happens in logic. Dialectical thinking for Hegel is always, according to Taylor, a "thinking-with-the-thing which is the object of thought, just as the intention of raising your hand is always part of what you do when raising your hand."[45]

Second, crucial for all understanding of Hegelian dialectics is the recognition that Hegel always begins with the concept (*Begriff*) in his effort to achieve metaphysical truth about the world. This has nothing to do with idealism, with the claim of an ontological priority of concepts over things, but rather with the fact that (1) the concept is the universal and the thing the particular and (2) we can access the latter only through the former. Nor should we think here of the concept's universality as relating to universal or general truths but rather to the (Kantian) "unconditioned" (*das Unbedingte*). That is to say, the concept's universality consists in its complete self-sufficiency where it does not depend on anything outside itself for its proper

43. One implication of this is that there can be no room for the Cartesian body/mind separation: "It was a basic principle of Hegel's thought that the subject, and all his functions, however 'spiritual,' were inescapably embodied; and this in two related dimensions: as a 'rational animal,' that is, as a living being who thinks; and as an expressive being, that is a being whose thinking always and necessarily expresses itself in a medium. This principle of necessary embodiment, as we may call it, is central to Hegel's conception of *Geist*, or cosmic spirit." See C. Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975), 82, 83.

44. Taylor, *Hegel*, 80.

45. "Thought and the determinations through which it operates (the *Denkbestimmungen*, or categories) are not the appanage of a subject over and against the world, but lie at the very root of things." See Taylor, 225. This is where Popper's well-known "refutation" of (Hegelian) dialectics is a caricature of the latter. Popper started with the claim that (1) if "p" is true, "p or q" is true as well (where q may stand for whatever proposition you like). Next, substitute "p or q" for "p" in (1), which results in (2) "p or q is true, and p is not true," from which it follows that (3) "q is true." So on the basis of a contradiction you can "prove" just about anything to be true, which obviously is absurd. See K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York, 1968), 319. A similar misunderstanding of dialectics is to be found in G. Leff, *The Tyranny of Concepts* (London, 1969). Leff accuses dialectical thinkers, especially Marx, of confusing language with reality when they say that *realities* "contradict" each other. But, Leff claims, only *concepts* can contradict each other. However, Leff is blind to the fact that all dialectics begins with abandoning the world/language regime we customarily accept.

articulation.[46] This is the concept's focus, what it strives for; and precisely this requires it to exclude everything outside itself, everything alien to itself. The introduction of the thing's external relations would inevitably distort the concept and blind us to the thing's nature. The world and the things it contains must be considered "absolute," that is to say, as what being they are "in themselves":[47] "Reason must grasp each thing as if it were the entire world, and as if nothing else existed outside it."[48] Only in this way can (dialectical) Reason gain a hold on metaphysical truth and ontological necessity.[49] As Hegel himself puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* "The true is thus the bacchanalian whirl in which no member is not drunken; and because each, as soon as it detaches itself, dissolves immediately—the whirl is just as much transparent and simple repose."[50]

And Reason can get at this metaphysical truth only by carefully following the lead of the thing's concept and by allowing itself to be guided by what Beiser calls the concept's "self-organization," "inner necessity," or "inherent movement."[51] Or, as Beiser also puts it, "The dialectic is what follows from the concept of the thing."[52]

In fact, this answers the question, posed above, of how Hegel succeeded in imparting movement to the Spinozist system. There is an "inner necessity" in the concept that sets it in motion.[53] Here again we must avoid the

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46. "But Hegel's own concept of the infinite or the unconditioned is entirely immanent." See Beiser, *Hegel,* 55.

47. Perhaps the best exemplification is found in any attempt to expound Hegelian dialectics itself. As Taylor says, "[T]here is something in Hegel's philosophy which is irresistibly reminiscent of Baron Münchhausen" (Taylor, 101). That is to say, when one starts to write about Hegel, it is best to begin with some vague Hegelian slogan, then see where it has to be emended, consider next where these emendations have to be emended—and so on indefinitely. This is what one might call "the dialectical experience," in which one might discern the sublime and unsurpassable grandeur of Hegel's philosophy. For here it reproduces something that is truly basic to the human condition: this *is* what life (and history!) are like.

48. Beiser, *Hegel,* 61.

49. "True, Kant deserves some credit for having gone beyond formal to transcendental logic. But he spoiled it all by restricting its conclusions to the world-as-known-by-us in contrast to the world as it is in itself. Hegel is going to offer us a transcendental logic which will also be an ontology." See Taylor, 227. By doing away with the subject/object split, Hegel succeeded in introducing necessity from the realm of language into the world itself. "The necessity with which Hegels' argument coincides concerns the ground of the existence of things. It is *ontological* necessity." See Taylor, 99.

50. Quoted in Taylor, 108.

51. Perhaps there is a faint reminiscence of Leibniz's monads here?

52. Beiser, 61.

53. "Das Fortgehen des Begriffs ist nicht mehr Übergehen noch Scheinen in Anderes, sondern *Entwicklung,* indem das Unterschiedene unmittelbar zugleich als das Identische miteinander und mit dem Ganzen gesetzt, die Bestimmtheit als ein freies Sein des ganzen Begriffes ist." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundriss* (1830; repr.,Hamburg, 1991),

temptation to model Hegel's "concept" on the mental entities we normally associate with that term. For Hegel, the concept inhabits the domain of both (what *we* call) the idea and the thing. In Taylor's words, "Thought and the determinations through which it operates (the *Denkbestimmungen,* or categories) are not the appanage of a subject over and against the world, but lie at the very root of things."[54]

But suppose now that we somehow succeeded in stopping this "movement": perhaps it spontaneously came to an end, or it became arrested at some stage of its self-development. In that case the Hegelian notion of the concept would be exchanged for the well-known and trustworthy regime of subject (language) and object (reality), whose relationship is typically fixed by the true sentence. Recall, furthermore, that this reality did have its predecessor under the Hegelian regime of the concept—though permanently being *sous rature* at that stage. So we should not be tempted to infer from the foregoing that reality, as described in terms of true statements, has now suddenly been created ex nihilo. Instead we could think of how sugar crystallizes when a sugar solution crosses the solubility curve after the temperature is lowered. In that sense one might speak of "hot" Hegelian (or representationally used) language versus "cold" Cartesian language—where the former is ordinarily associated by Hegel with the term *Vernunft,* and the latter with *Verstand.*

Dialecticians often speak of "reification" in this context. The term will be obvious: the shift from the dialectical to the Cartesian regime gives birth to "things" (*res*), and they stand in a relationship to language that no longer leaves room for history. Reification is the empiricist ideology of the dehistoricized present in which the lazy mind always prefers to live. Or to be more precise, this lazy mind may be as active as the modern businessman and banker can ever be, but it offers him only the doubtful fruits of *Verstand* and never the life-giving fruits of *Vernunft.* It has then fallen victim to what Hegel called "bad infinity" (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*), where quantitative change has replaced qualitative change. Dialectics has ceased, and time has come to a standstill.

This brings me to a third comment. Like most of those embracing the Spinozist reaction against Kant, Hegel was ready to grant to nature a no less prominent role than it had occupied in the *Ethica* with one important quali-

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151. Development culminates in *die Idee*: "[D]ie Idee ist das Wahre *an und für sich, die absolute Einheit des Begriffs und der Objektivität.* Ihr ideeller Inhalt ist kein anderer als der Begriff in seinen Bestimmungen; ihr reeller Inhalt ist nur seine Darstellung, die er sich in der Form äusserlichen Daseins gibt und diese Gestalt in seiner Idealität eingegeschlossen, in seiner Macht, so sich in ihr erhält." Ibid., 182.

54. See Taylor, 225.

fication: the Spinozists of the late eighteenth century firmly rejected Spinoza's requirement to proceed "more geometrico," as well as his mechanistic and deterministic conception of nature.[55] They replaced Spinoza's nature by a pronouncedly *organicist* conception of nature:

> The organic worldview seemed enormously appealing to a whole generation of thinkers at the close of the eighteenth century. The great attraction of the organic paradigm is that it seemed to uphold the unity and continuity of nature by explaining both the mental and the physical according to a single paradigm. It seemed to realize that long-sought ideal of all science since the seventeenth century: a non-reductive yet naturalistic explanation of life and the mind. The organic paradigm is non-reductivist since it explains everything holistically, by showing how they play a necessary role in a whole. The organic paradigm is also naturalistic . . . because it understands all events according to laws, where these laws are holistic rather than mechanistic.[56]

So, in agreement with the intellectual climate of the time, Hegel "vitalized" Spinoza. He welcomed the introduction of Aristotelian formal and final causes when describing this vitalized nature; he discerned in nature entelechial principles—which he called "ideas"[57]—striving for their realization, and he considered these principles the *trait d'union* between the domains of nature and those of life and of human history.

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55. Here Kant might have expressed his qualified agreement; think of his observation in the third *Critique* that there could never be a Newton for the growth of a blade of grass. And Kant adds here that we can fully comprehend only what we have made ourselves, thus introducing unwittingly Vico's famous historicist thesis of the *verum et factum convertuntur* in his otherwise very antihistoricist thought.

56. Beiser, *Hegel,* 85, 86. Beiser is here in agreement with Zammito's general characteristic of the German idealists: "[S]ie wollten dem Absoluten nicht Leben und Existenz absprechen, sondern fassten das *Leben* selbst als *hen kai pan*. Indem die jungen Idealisten Spinozas Vorstellung des Urwesens als wesentlich innerer mit dem Welt des Seienden verschmolzen dachten, vereinten sie ein ganz und gar nicht lebloses Absolutes mit einer beseelten Natur. Die Natur war für sie mehr als blosse Materie, die Natur war lebendig." See J. Zammito, "Die Ursprünge des deutschen Idealismus," in M. Heinz (Hg.), *Herder und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* (Amsterdam 1997), 128.

57. It is here that Hegel's argument bears a striking resemblance to the so-called doctrine of the historical ideas advocated by early historicists such as Ranke and Humboldt. Discussing Hegel's Aristotelianism, Beiser comments: "if we keep in mind Hegel's Aristotelian concept of the idea, then his idealism has a fundamentally teleological meaning. To state that everything is an appearance of the idea now means that it strives to realize the absolute idea, or that everything acts for an end, which is the absolute idea" (see Beiser, *Hegel,* 67). This completely captures the historicist notion of the historical idea. See also note 53 on the relationship between Hegel's notions of "the concept" (*der Begriff*) and "the Idea" (*die Idee*). The historicist notion of the historical idea can be seen as a fusion of these two.

This may make it clear how close Hegel and historicists actually were. For we cannot fail to be struck by the similarities between their respective uses of the notion of idea. In both cases the idea is a quasi-Aristotelian entelechy operative in a vague limbo between language and the world but whose nature the speculative philosopher or the historian has to grasp in order to understand the past. Historical knowledge is knowledge of the idea. Thus Beiser:

> Following Aristotle's critique of Plato, Hegel thinks that universals do not exist as such but only *in re,* in particular things. As forms inherent in things, as concrete universals, universals are, in Aristotle's language, the *formal-final* causes of things. The formal cause consists in the essence or nature of a thing, what makes it the thing it is, and the final cause is the purpose the object attempts to realize, the goal of its development.[58]

In both cases a Spinozist identity philosophy gives the idea its philosophical respectability. It will be clear, therefore, that historicism was never all that far removed from Hegel (and other speculative philosophers of history) to begin with. Moreover, one need only recall the realities of historical debates concerning ideas such as "the Renaissance" or "the Cold War" to recognize that such debates, with their typically inextricable mixture of talk about the past itself and talk about the relevant historical ideas, are the best illustrations of what both Hegel and the Rankean historicist regarded as the heart of historical writing and of what ties both of them to the contemporary historian trying to make sense of the past. The notion of the historical idea unites all three.

However, there is also a fundamental difference between Hegel on the one hand and the historicist and the contemporary historian on the other. Hegel not only naturalized history; he also *rationalized* it. Reason is immanent in nature; as John Zammito puts it, "Die Natur als lebendige Kraft ist sowohl in der Welt als auch deren höheres Prinzip. Sie is *immanente Vernunft.*"[59] We encounter here Hegel's return to Stoic "logos philosophy" and see him majestically consigning the entire effort of Kantian critical philosophy to the dustbin.[60] In both Stoicism and the natural law philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Reason had two habitats rather than just one (i.e., the

58. Beiser, *Hegel,* 67.

59. Zammito, "Die Ursprünge des deutschen Idealismus," 128; see also pp. 130, 131.

60. Thus Beiser writes, "It is indeed striking that Hegel commended the old rationalism precisely because it assumed that thinking could grasp reality in itself, and in this respect he even held that it stood on a higher level than Kant's critical philosophy." See Beiser, *Hegel,* 55.

human mind). Reason was believed to be present in the world itself, in the sense that the Stoics' *logoi spermatikoi*—that is, "logical seeds"—guaranteed the rational and predictable behavior of objects in the world. Things do not suddenly fall to the ceiling when we drop them. This is what Hegel calls "objective Reason" (*objektiver Geist*). But the very same Reason is also present in our minds and thus enables us to fathom the secrets of nature—and in this it is "subjective Reason" (*subjektiver Geist*). That was Hegel's version of identity philosophy: subject and object are identical in that both are manifestations of Reason; so Reason is what guides the dialectical interaction of what we call "subject" and object" (both of them, again, *sous rature*).

This is why Hegel could solemnly declare about the philosophy of history, "The only Thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History, is the simple conception of *Reason;* that Reason is the Sovereign of the World."[61] And whatever view one may take of Hegel's rationalization of world history, which he elaborated in great detail in the more than one thousand pages of volumes 2 to 4 of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History,* it cannot be denied that all of it remained wholly within the parameters of Hegel's Spinozism: philosophical reflection will guide us to the Spinozist identity of Subjective and Objective Reason. Reason is historicized but nowhere transgresses the boundaries of Spinozist monism.

However, such a satisfactory story *cannot* be told for historicism. The reason for this is that historicism, in the end, abandoned Spinoza for Kant. Gadamer showed as much in the chapter of his *Wahrheit und Methode* dealing with Ranke, Droysen, and Dilthey. Dilthey himself had already offered the correct diagnosis of the problem when he wrote about his predecessors Ranke and Droysen: "Instead of going back to the epistemological postulates of the historical school and those of idealism from Kant to Hegel and thus recognizing the incompatibility of these postulates, they have uncritically combined these two points of view."[62]

That is to say, the early historicists were not themselves aware of the irreconcilability of their Spinozist embrace of the historical world, which had still inspired Hegel's speculative philosophy of history, and the ideal of a real "science of history" à la Kant.[63] This had been their real weakness, which Gadamer wished to remedy:

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61. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History, trans.* J. Sibree (Kitchener, Ont., 2001), 22.

62. Quoted in H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York, 2003), 219.

63. And to which one may add that this is still a blind spot in much of contemporary reflection on the writing of history.

> This aim in itself exhibits his withdrawal from speculative idealism. It sets up an analogy that has to be understood in quite a literal way. Dilthey wants to say that historical reason calls for the same kind of justification as pure reason. The epoch-making result of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was not only that it destroyed metaphysics as a purely rational science of the world, the soul, and God, but that, at the same time, it revealed an area within which the use of a priori concepts is justified and which makes knowledge possible.[64]

We can reformulate the foregoing in terms of Mink's notion of Universal History. Within Hegel's speculative idealism, dialectical and rational reflection on history will yield the historical idea of the past, as delineated in Hegel's outline of Universal History. From a purely philosophical perspective the attempt to do this is unobjectionable. The historicists adopted from speculative philosophy the idea of Universal History and even regarded its exposition as the highest aim of all historical writing.[65] They also espoused speculative philosophy's notion of the historical idea. But in so doing they neglected the fact that both Universal History and the historical idea are philosophical, speculative notions. They therefore did not hesitate to project them onto the past itself and then went on to ask the epistemological question, how is reliable historical knowledge of them possible? Philosophical questions were thus illegally transformed into historical questions. And Dilthey, though much more aware of the problem than his historicist predecessors, still ended up doing exactly the same. When he exchanged the epistemological questions

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64. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 219.

65. Similarly, for Ranke only Universal History presents us with the right perspective for a perfect and complete understanding of the past: "Die Gottheit—wenn ich diese Bemerkung wagen darf—denke ich mir so, dass sie, die je keine Zeit vor ihr liegt, die ganze historische Menschheit in ihrer Gesamtheit überschaut und überall gleich wert findet." And he adds the following comment: "Hier ist die Idee des unendlichen Verstandes (intellectus infinitus), für den alles zugleich ist (*omnia simul*), zum Urbild aller historischer Gerechtigkeit umgeformt." See L. von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte,* vol. 9 (Leipzig, 1883), 4ff. Ranke's intuition comes remarkably close to Louis O. Mink's "configurational comprehension" and that is how, in Mink's view, historians make sense of the past: "[T]o comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey." See Mink, *Historical Understanding,* 57. Even God makes His entrance here as well. For elsewhere Mink writes about configurational comprehension: "Boethius, in a different image of totality, described God's knowledge as a *totum simul* in which all moments of time would be seen as simultaneously present in a single divine perception—history spread out in a single panorama as a landscape is for us." See ibid., 38. The historical text can be argued to give us this *omnia simul* (Ranke) or *totum simul* (Mink), which explains in turn why the text can never be modeled on the past itself, since the latter never has this character, and hence why the past cannot be seen as "an untold story." For a further discussion of this issue see chapter 2, section 5.

of the historicists for a transcendental hermeneutics, he only reformulated the problem without solving it.

The irony is, therefore, that historicism, that most perfect of all historical theories down to the present day, was thus born from a philosophical confusion: from projecting onto the past itself the intrinsically speculative notion of the idea and hence from the effort to acquire empirical historical knowledge of a speculative notion. The irony is all the more striking in that dialectics itself cannot be accused of philosophical confusion, since it always respects consistency with the conclusions that follow from the historicization of Spinozism. Nevertheless, it seems to have become irrelevant for contemporary reflection about the past and about historical writing. Speculative philosophy à la Hegel may remind us of Wittgenstein's ladder that one can throw away after having used it. Its role was merely to provide the historicist with the notion of the idea, which proved immensely fruitful for historical practice despite the fact that the historicists misunderstood the term's original meaning. This is a fine example of that "creative misunderstanding" that intellectual history sometimes presents us with.

But however doubtful the ancestry of the notion of the historical idea may be, it remains indispensable for a proper understanding of the writing of history. It is the legacy of historicism to all later philosophy of history, and the price to be paid for ignoring it is to dream away in scientistic illusions. Universal History and the historical idea should no longer be regarded as the products of speculative thought nor as entities in the past quietly awaiting their historical investigation. Instead, they lead their life only in the domain of historical representation. And the supreme irony is that they are as indispensable there as theories are in the sciences: so the scientistic philosopher of history should cherish the historical idea even more warmly than his historicist colleague!

7. Conclusion: Historicism and Philosophy of Language

The philosophy of history has had its literary turn, but it has not yet had its linguistic turn.[66] An exception, of course, is Mink. But because of his premature death the promises of his insights were never fulfilled. It is true that many theorists expressed their agreement with Mink, but few were really aware of the revolutionary implications of his ideas. They never realized that Mink's denunciation of Universal History did for history what Quine had

66. For a discussion of this claim, see chapter 6, section 4.

done for philosophy of language and that culminated in Davidson's attack on the notion of a conceptual scheme. In both cases the critiques cleared away all frameworks that had been thought to provide some background allegedly shared by language and reality, in terms of which their epistemological relationship could be defined.

In order to obtain an adequate grasp of these revolutionary implications we can return to Rorty. We have already seen that Rorty was aware of the parallelism between Heidegger's attack on the neo-Kantian epistemological tradition on the one hand and the antiepistemological consequences of Quine's and Davidson's philosophies of language on the other. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*[67] Rorty had concluded from this—correctly, in my view—that the historicism that Heidegger had inherited from his teachers Windelband and Rickert might well serve as a new point of departure for Anglophone philosophy of language, from which it could be expected to map hitherto unexplored territory. In order for these promises to be realized, philosophers of language would have to make the writing of history an object of their philosophical reflection. But Rorty could never bring himself to do this. Part of the explanation for this is that Heidegger, who was his main guide here, foreclosed any genuinely historical orientation through his exclusive focus on the narrow space of the individual human being. Something similar is true of Heidegger's most famous disciple, Gadamer, whom Rorty had discussed toward the end of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For unlike Anglo-American hermeneutics, with its preoccupation with human action, Gadamerian hermeneutics was mainly addressed to the interpretation of texts. And this, too, tends to restrict the scope of our attention to the individual (writing, reading, and interpreting texts). All this may explain, and partly justify, why Rorty seems to have soon lost his interest in Heidegger, Gadamer, and the whole issue of historicism.

Nevertheless, the problems Rorty had at one point placed on the agenda still have to be dealt with. He was right to argue that Anglo-American philosophy of language, as exemplified by Quine and Davidson, moves irresistibly in the direction of historicism. New and interesting results can be expected from it only if it is willing to face this fact. But what is no less important is that philosophers of history should be far more aware than they presently are of the philosophical riches of the historicist tradition. If they can bring themselves to rediscover that tradition, their reward will be that their discipline will come to play a no less central role in the realm

67. And in R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Sussex, 1982), chap. 3.

of philosophy than was the case around the beginning of the previous century.

This, then, is what I hope to do in the remainder of this book. I will translate Ranke's and Humboldt's brand of historicism into a more modern philosophical vocabulary. Doing so will make us aware of some of the most fundamental problems concerning the relationship between language and the world that have not been addressed by philosophy of language since the days of Gottlob Frege.

CHAPTER 2

Time

1. Introduction

We saw in the previous chapter that according to historicism, the nature, essence, or identity of a thing lies in its history. The unprecedented intellectual revolution effected by historicism in the early decades of the nineteenth century endowed all of human existence with a temporal dimension, with irreversible ramifications for how we conceive of ourselves and of our world even today. Historicism rolled out all things in time, as one might roll out in space with a rolling pin a crust for the bottom of a pie. All things human were now perceived to be subject to a development in time. And it was the historian's august and sublime task to demonstrate what our world looks like from this newly discovered, essentially *temporal* perspective. Time is historicism's most basic category, and it is unlikely that historians—whether they embrace historicism or not—will ever wish to contest the role of time in the writing of history.

One would therefore expect that ample attention was paid to the topic of time in the historicist tradition. But this expectation is disappointed by even a cursory consultation of the most important works on the writing of history produced by the main historicist historians: they liked to talk endlessly about growth, about development, about organic evolution, about genetic power, about the uniqueness of individual epochs, about fate and coinci-

dence, and so on—but they hardly ever discuss the concept of time as such.[1] It is as though time itself remained embedded in the kinds of notions just mentioned, and no one felt the challenge to carefully isolate time from them. Shortly before his death in 2006 Reinhart Koselleck, the late twentieth-century German philosopher of history who remained closest to historicism, published a collection of essays entitled *Zeitschichten* (*Layers of Time*),[2] and one would expect him to have offered a thorough analysis of time at least somewhere in that book. But although the notion of time is mentioned frequently enough and in a host of different contexts, no sustained analysis is ever given. One is reminded here of Wittgenstein's observation: "Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted? You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do not really see the eye. And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye."[3] It seems to be just like this with time in historical writing: historicism regards everything from the perspective of time—but apparently it is precisely this which makes it impossible to speak about time itself.

This suggests what the plot of my argument will be in this chapter. I will try to give an explanation of why historicist historians were basically right when showing so little interest in the topic of history and time and shall do so by discussing what several philosophers of history—Danto, Mink, Carr, Ricoeur and Baumgartner—have said about time (and narrative). In the course of my argument below I will interpret time in three different ways: (1) as a Kantian transcendental category, (2) as chronological time (or "clock time"), and (3) as embodying man's historicity ("lived time"). As will become clear, in none of these three forms is time of much significance for the writing of history. Let me put this a bit more provocatively. I hope to be able to show that Louis O. Mink was right when arguing that the function of time in the study of history is precisely to make itself invisible. Time certainly has its role to play in the writing of history, but its role is a *negative* rather than a *positive* one—and this may explain why such scant attention has been paid to it. After arguing for this somewhat paradoxical conclusion I will return to the transcendentalist approach. But I shall do so in a way different from Kant's and discuss instead H. M. Baumgartner's most valuable proposal to see "narrative" as the transcendental condition of the possibility of histori-

1. I know of only one signal exception to this rule—namely, Ranke's comment on time mentioned in note 65 in the previous chapter. Needless to say, a host of philosophers of history have commented on the notion of time.

2. R. Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Franfurt am Main, 2000).

3. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus,* trans. C. K. Ogden (London, 1922), sec. 5.633.

cal knowledge. Though I shall refrain from Baumgartner's transcendentalism, his conception of narrative comes close to that of representation to be investigated in the remainder of this book.

2. Time as a Transcendental Concept

I have said that time can be considered constitutive of the study of history and of its object of investigation. History studies how things develop over time. One way to give shape to this intuition is by regarding time as a transcendental condition (in the Kantian sense) of the possibility of historical knowledge.

Now, according to Kant, both space and time are "pure" concepts and as such without any empirical content themselves. But reliable empirical knowledge of reality is possible only if we give shape to empirical reality in accordance with these two "forms of intuition" (*Anschauungsformen*). Knowledge is always knowledge of spatial-temporal reality. As Kant himself put it in—for him—an unusually clear way in the *Prolegomena:* "Now space and time are the intuitions upon which pure mathematics bases all its cognitions and judgments, which come forward as at once apodictic and necessary. . . . This faculty of intuiting *a priori* does not, however, concern the matter of appearance—i.e., that which is sensation in the appearance, for that constitutes the empirical—but only the form of appearance, space and time."[4]

Continuing this transcendentalist argument, we might now go on to say that in the Kantian view all history, all knowledge of the past, is possible only because of the *Anschauungsform* of time. It would follow that time is no accidental concept in historical writing: it truly is the condition of the possibility of all historical knowledge. It would be difficult to think of a stronger and more intimate link between time and historical writing.

However, there are two objections to this transcendentalist line of thought. First, Kant himself did not have the least intention of providing with his transcendental aesthetics a transcendentalist account of the possibility of historical knowledge. He was interested in the application of mathematics to our understanding of the world and in the natural sciences, and as a typical representative of the Enlightenment he had neither interest in nor respect for historical writing. His argument is not related in any specific way to the study of history but is meant to lay an epistemological foundation for disciplines such as astronomy, geology, and—what Kant especially

4. I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics,* trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge, 2004), 34, 35.

had in mind—Newtonian mechanics. Time plays a key role in mechanics, where it occurs in a great number of formulas. This should already put us on our guard. For as Spengler very perceptively observed, Kant's conception of time concerns "a 'time' that can be mathematically expressed in such forms as t^2, $\sqrt{-t}$, from which the assumption of a time of zero magnitude or of negative times is, to say the least, *not* excluded. Obviously this is something quite outside the domain of Life, Destiny, and living *historical* Time."[5] In other words, not *all* time is *historical* time.

My second objection concerns history as a form of knowledge. Historical knowledge, or historical insight, is always embodied in historical texts. I deliberately speak here of historical texts, not of the individual statements contained in them. The main problem of all historical writing, and the problem we wish to solve if we are concerned with historical knowledge, is a problem of selection. It is the problem of which true statements to include in our accounts of the past. The main difficulty for the historian is not that of making true statements about the past. This is a comparatively easy thing to do, though of course posing challenges of its own. The more intractable problem is how to select the right ones among all the available true statements. In the practice of the writing of history, and particularly in historical debate, true statements should thus be seen as atoms rather than as molecules: one does not look "into" them, so to speak. Now one always finds indicators of time in the statements of which historical texts are composed (for example, "the French Revolution broke out in 1789") and hence at the "atomic" level, so to speak. It might be objected now that these sentential atoms are chronologically related in the historian's text—so that the sequence of time is also operative at the level of the text. Indeed, history can be written in this way. When this is the case, we speak of chronicles and annals (I will say more on these notions in the next section). But modern historical writing no longer adopts the chronological order of chronicles and annals. The implication is that time can be of only minor importance to the study of history. And that means the end of the transcendentalist option.

3. Time as Clock Time

Time is one of the greatest puzzles in philosophy. Ever since Augustine's well-known statement in his *Confessiones* that he knew what time was only as long

5. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality,* trans. C. F. Atkinson, vol. 1 (New York, 1946), 124.

as people did not ask him questions about it, philosophers have had remarkably little success in their attempts to understand this concept. With clock time, however, we have a notion of time that is fairly unproblematic from a philosophical perspective. Clock time is simply the kind of time we read off a clock. Sixty minutes go into one hour, twenty-four hours into one day—and so on through weeks, months, and years to decades and centuries. Clock time is defined in terms of objectively perceptible physical or astronomical phenomena.

What is the significance of clock time for the study of history? We can answer this question by considering the case of chronicles and annals. Hayden White mentions the Annals of Sankt Gallen as an example of a chronicle (hence they are not annals in the proper sense of the word). White quotes the following passage: "722, good harvest; 723, —; 724, —; 725, the Saracenes came for the first time; 726, —; 727, —; 728, —; 729, —; 730, —; 731, blessed Beda died; 732, Carl fought against the Saracenes at Poitiers on Saturday."[6]

As the example shows, chronology, or clock time, structures the historical narrative here—if we are willing to speak of historical *narrative* to begin with. Much the same is true for annals as well. Just like chronicles, annals follow the succession of the years, but they are not restricted to a mere chronological account. For one thing, unlike chronicles, annals ordinarily concentrate on some particular historical entity, such as a monastery, a city, a sovereign, or a country. Annals thus have a type of coherence that is absent from chronicles. Second, annals go further than chronicles in tentatively supplying causal relations between individual historical events.

Hayden White rightly points out that we should not look with contempt at chronicles and annals from the perspective of contemporary historical writing. In societies such as those of Europe a millennium ago, which were marked by a low degree of political or institutional cohesion and with individuals no less dependent on the caprices of nature than on the actions of their fellow men, chronicles and annals were probably the most sensible way of accounting for the past. This is how time and history were then experienced: just one damn thing after another. There was no more to be said. Moreover, chronicles and annals are not inferior to contemporary historiography with respect to objectivity, truth, and realism. Indeed, they compare quite favorably on these counts with the often complicated and fragile theoretical constructions that we find in modern historical writing since Ranke.

Nevertheless, no historian nowadays will take a stand for chronicles or for annals. Compared with modern historical writing, both lack a sense of

6. H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 8.

closure, a structure of beginning and end. Nor do they succeed in weighing and interpreting the historical data in the way modern historical writing does. Hence, even annalistic masterpieces—as there undoubtedly have been!—will strike the contemporary reader as being strangely mindless. The writing moves on steadily like a ripple on the surface of time and never gives us an encompassing survey of the past events. It lacks "scope." The text here is not a web but a line, which never manages to evoke a suggestion of depth, perspective, or coherence. To quote White, chronicles and annals fail as "proper history, at least according to later commentators, by virtue of two considerations. First, the order of discourse follows the order of chronology; it presents events in the order of their occurrence and cannot, therefore, offer a kind of meaning that a narratologically governed account can be said to provide. Second, probably owing to the 'annalistic' order of the discourse, the account does not so much conclude as simply terminate."[7]

In sum, chronicles and annals do not succeed in imparting meaning to the past. But the meaningful interpretation of history is precisely the aim and purpose of modern historical writing, and the mere chronological order of clock time does not contribute to it. So we should dismiss clock time, too, as a candidate for a constitutive category of historical writing.

4. Time as Historicity (Lived Time)

I have now "missed" twice, so to speak. I aimed too high with the transcendentalist notion of time, because it could be invoked just as well for the epistemological foundation of disciplines other than the study of history. I aimed too low with clock time: chronological clock time is of value only for chronicles and annals; it is of no real significance for modern historical writing. However, contemporary historical theory offers us a third try.

I am thinking of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* and, especially, of David Carr's *Time, Narrative and History* of 1986 as well as the essays published after that book, in which its main thesis was further elaborated.[8] As is apparent from the titles, time is the central theme in both of these books. Moreover, both works can be placed in the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology aims at a maximally unprejudiced, quasi-scientific description of how the world appears to us, taking everyday lived experience as the point of departure. As Edmund Husserl argued, this point of departure

7. Ibid., 7

8. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* trans. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago 1984–1988); D. Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington, 1986).

should be equated neither with the experiencing subject (for this would inevitably result in some version of idealism) nor with the object experienced (which would lead to some version of empiricism). Husserl thus hoped to be able to avoid and even transcend the forced choice between idealism and realism. One pervasive concern of phenomenologists since Husserl has been to emphasize the temporality or historicity of all phenomenological experience. This is the starting point for both Ricoeur and Carr. Their basic idea is that the temporality of experience applies not only to the way in which the individual experiences the world. Instead, they argue, there is a continuity among time's role at the elementary level of the individual's experience, its role at the level of the group or the collective (for example, the state or nation), and last, its role at the level of historical writing.

It is difficult to disentangle Ricoeur's argument about time from the other themes that are pursued in his large trilogy and are not relevant to the present context. Carr, on the other hand, exclusively focuses on time, which is why, for reasons of economy and clarity, I will discuss Carr's book rather than Ricoeur's otherwise profound and deeply impressive work.

Carr's argument proceeds in two steps. First, he wants to show that time is an essential category for describing the individual's experience and actions (Carr could here refer to his phenomenological precursors). Second, he hopes to demonstrate the continuity just mentioned among the roles that time and historicity play for the individual, for the group, and for historical writing. The first step is the easiest. Carr here follows Husserl's view that experience always presupposes a recollection of the past ("retention") and an anticipation of the future ("protention"). By way of a felicitous metaphor, Carr compares experience to hearing a melody: to recognize a melody we must not only listen to the separate notes but also remember what we have already heard and have certain expectations for what is yet to come. In other words—and this formulation is of great importance to Carr—our lived experience itself already possesses a *narrative* structure. Temporality and narrativity are two intimately connected concepts, and they are the two pillars on which all of Carr's argument is founded. As he repeats over and over, we encounter narrativity and temporality not just at the level of historical narratives about (past) reality but also as part of the relevant parts of reality *itself,* and that is to say, of life itself. As Carr puts it, narrativity and temporality are not "a dress which covers something else, but the structure inherent in human experience and action."[9]

9. Carr, *Time, Narrative and History,* 65.

The second step is more challenging. It concerns the question of whether narrativity and temporality are of as much as importance to collectives and their histories as they are to the individual. In other words, is there such a thing as a narrative *social* time providing a structure corresponding to that of the *individual*'s lived experience? In a balanced and fair analysis, Carr concludes that the attempts of Husserl, Heidegger, and Alfred Schütz (one of Husserl's followers) to argue from the individual to the group have been unsuccessful.[10] In order to remedy their shortcomings, Carr now turns to Hegel, and in particular to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, made famous by Alexandre Kojève and his French Marxist disciples (and more recently by Francis Fukuyama). Hegel claimed that the master can only be a master insofar as he is *recognized* as such by the slave. More generally, we recognize ourselves, and first become what we are, in and through being recognized by others. In Carr's view, recognition as defined by Hegel is the model for the individual's integration into a collective with a certain social cohesion. The collective is therefore more than just the sum of separate, atomistic, Hobbesian individuals. Conversely, individuals define and interpret themselves in terms of the group and the patterns of recognition existing within it. This means—and this is what Carr is interested in—that thanks to the mechanisms of recognition there is a continuum between the individual and the collective. And according to Carr, this continuity implies that narrativity and temporality are categories for the collective just as much as for the individual. The collective's narrative and temporal structure takes shape above all in the historical stories that the group tells about itself.

In sum, according to Carr, time is a category that is constitutive both of past reality itself and of the historical accounts given of it. Time constitutes both individual and collective human action. And time determines the structure of all historical narration insofar as the latter is to do justice to the temporality of human action. So from both an ontological and an epistemological perspective, time is the foundational category of history and historical writing. Therefore, if we think of lived time rather than of transcendental time or clock time, there is no doubt that time is the foundational category of all historical writing.

5. The Disagreement between Carr and Mink

We are indebted to Carr for the clear and vigorous way in which he explained the role of time in the study of history. Nevertheless, we can find

10. Ibid., 117, 127.

strong arguments against his main thesis in the writings of Louis O. Mink and Hayden White. Unlike Carr, Mink sees a *dis*continuity between the lives of individuals and collectives on the one hand and the historical stories that can be told about them on the other. Whereas Carr connects temporality to both life and narrativity, Mink associates time only with life itself, not with narrativity—not with the *stories* that historians tell about life. Hence Mink would reject Carr's thesis that time is a foundational category in the study of history.

So let us compare Carr's views with those of Mink. A first problem with Carr's thesis is the following. As we have seen, his point of departure is the individual's experience and action. A social or historical collective (a state, a nation, etc.) exists only insofar as the individuals are prepared to recognize it: only then can temporality and narrativity be transposed from the individual to the collective. Thus Carr writes, "Only groups distinguished by the conscious and active participation of their members qualify as we-subjects in the sense of this discussion. . . . We are saying that the we-subject exists insofar as individuals take it to exist and act accordingly."[11] Keeping in mind how Carr uses Hegel's ideas about the master-slave relationship, we should expect such a view of the group. Moreover, the historian himself is also required to be able to identify with the individual or the collective in question. Only such an identification guarantees the existence of a we -subject. It is as if the identification of the historian with a collective grants to the latter the property of being an individual in the way that Louis XV and Beethoven were individuals.

However, an implication of Carr's embracing we-perspective (as an extension of the me-perspective) is that historical writing remains always and inexorably tied to the perspective of some individual historical agent and of his or her social or historical group. Were the historian to transcend that perspective and develop a perspective of his own, he would irrevocably sever the continuum between the individual, the collective, and the historian on which Carr's whole argument is based. But the historian—and that is the crucial problem for this view—is usually, and perhaps even essentially, an *outsider* vis-à-vis the individuals and collectives whose histories he investigates. Historians typically write about the past from a they-perspective instead of from a we-perspective. They are interested in the past precisely insofar as it is different from the present and insofar as they, the historians, have become estranged from the life-experience of the historical agents.

11. Ibid., 161.

Moreover, historians typically wish to say things about the past that historical agents, whether individuals or collectives, did not and perhaps could not know about themselves. This intuition is already contained in Hegel's well-known notion of "the cunning of reason": only in retrospect do we realize what the real meaning of certain historical developments has been. It is telling that for all his Hegelianism, Carr's line of reasoning does not leave room for this Hegelian notion. Admittedly, Carr is ready to concede that there is often a vast distance between the historian and the historical agent; after all, he cannot deny that historians do not hesitate to speak about ancient Egypt or the early Middle Ages. But then Carr attempts to neutralize the difficulties generated by this concession with the statement that *we*—and thus also historians—"are situated *for us* within the larger panorama of history reaching back into the remotest regions and times."[12] Here the we-perspective is expanded so excessively that a they-perspective becomes all but inconceivable.

This brings me to a further consideration. We should not forget that the recognition of this difference, or even the outright conflict between the perspective of the historian and that of the historical agent, was in fact the source of narrativism in modern historical theory. Narrative structures, narrative logic, and historical narrative itself became legitimate objects of theoretical reflection only after historical narration came to be credited with a certain autonomy in relation to the narrated past (or the past as it had been lived). It is all the more surprising, then, that Carr denies this autonomy from an explicitly narrativist position. And this raises the question of how this disagreement amongst narrativists became possible.

As Carr himself explains in the introduction to his book, the key to this disagreement is Mink's famous dictum that "stories are not lived but told."[13] Carr, on the other hand, wants to embed narrativity in life as well, for according to him, experience and action always have a narrative structure. This may explain the following statement by Carr: "Louis Mink was thus operating with a totally false distinction when he said that stories are not lived but told. They are told in being lived and lived by being told."[14] Hence the dis-

12. Ibid., 174.

13. Ibid., 10 and 62. See also L. O. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, ed. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca, 1987), 60. Clearly, this claim is in agreement with Mink's attack on Universal History as presented in the previous chapter. Universal History as the untold story of the past, though inherent in the past itself, to which historians should approximate as well as they can, is the hidden presupposition of all claims, such as Carr's, that stories are not only told but also lived.

14. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 61.

agreement between Carr and Mink concerns the connection between time or temporality and narrativity. Carr repeatedly mentions both in the same breath: life unites time and temporality with narrativity.

Perhaps the disagreement between Carr and Mink can be clarified in terms of the distinction between self-experience and self-knowledge. One may agree with Carr that self-experience is always temporal, if only because by definition we can experience ourselves only in the here and now. Indeed, we can *know* certain things about our past experiences, but such knowledge is *eo ipso* not a matter of *experience.* If I know that I felt a toothache some ten years ago, I do not reexperience that pain by recalling it from my memory. It might seem that Carr lost sight of this distinction between self-experience and self-knowledge—as expressed in a narrative—and thus came to project the narrativity of self-*knowledge* onto the admittedly temporal character of self-*experience.*

Be that as it may, in Mink's reasoning the fact that stories are not lived but told marks the distance between temporality (life) and historical narrative. Mink offers several arguments in support of this distance between time and narrativity. The most important one is that the historian's task is precisely to bring *together,* in and by narrative, what is temporally *separate* in life or in the past *itself.* Historical narrative binds within one synopsis what is experienced separately and seriatim, in the temporal succession characteristic of life or the past itself. Thus Mink writes,

> In the configurational comprehension of a story . . . the end is connected with the promise of the beginning as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward reference cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references. To comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream in a single survey.[15]

And are not all historians familiar with the phenomenon that time and chronology play a less significant part in historiography the better we begin to understand a given historical event or historical period? Dates are of merely preliminary significance for historical insight. All that is of real importance in historical writing begins only once we have left time and chronology behind us. The great masterpieces of twentieth-century historical writing

15. Mink, *Historical Understanding,* 57. See also note 65 in chapter 1.

rarely mention dates. Think, in particular, of so-called cross-sectional studies, such as Fernand Braudel's book on the Mediterranean world at the time of Philip II, which does not present us with a development over time but is instead content with describing what that world looked like at one specific temporal cross-section. We therefore have every reason to agree with Mink's thesis "that time is not the essence of narrative."[16] What is more, it is the essence of historical narratives to *obliterate* or *transcend* time as much as possible. Historical narrative must place temporality in the background or, even better, eliminate it; it "eats" and "digests" time, so to speak.

Mink's point of view by no means forces us to reject the importance of time and narrativity for the individual, which Carr was right to emphasize so strongly. For why could we not under certain circumstances be the historians of ourselves? Nothing compels Mink to deny that we as individuals may often tell autobiographical, historical stories about ourselves and that we continuously base our practical orientation on such stories, whether detailed or not. Nevertheless, Mink insists that acting and telling a story about oneself are two conceptually distinct things, no matter how much somebody may wisely base all meaningful action on the (or a) story of his or her own life. Whoever tells a story does not act—and vice versa. The problem with Carr's continuity thesis is that it loses sight of the difference between these two levels, and it does so for lack of a realization that the agent and the historian may very well be united in one and the same person.

I grant that Carr's critique of Mink is not altogether unreasonable. Both Mink and White tend to suggest that the distinction between historical fact and narration is identical with the distinction between life and its historical interpretation. By conflating these two distinctions, they suggest the quasi-positivist image of an inherently meaningless reality quietly awaiting a narrative interpretation that is wholly independent from it. Carr is right to correct this quasi-positivist schematism by pointing out that through our actions we sometimes give shape to historical reality (and not only to its interpretations) on the basis of narrative articulation. However, Carr falls back into the opposite extreme when he completely equates life with narrativity. In fact the relation between the two resembles that between reading and interpreting what is read; both complement and even presuppose each other, but they remain distinct operations in the last analysis.

16. Ibid.

6. Again: Transcendentalism

In section 2 we discussed the Kantian transcendentalist account of time (and space). We concluded that no clarification of the role of time in the writing of history was to be expected from it. Historicists will probably not be deeply impressed by this negative result, given Kant's infatuation with the sciences. They will be likely to argue that history and the sciences are wholly different disciplines and that we should forever avoid the scientistic temptation when reflecting on the writing of history. Therefore, they will say, the failure of Kant's transcendentalism to account for historical time does not in the least rule out the possibility of a transcendentalist account of historical time that does take seriously the unbridgeable gap between the sciences on the one hand and history and the humanities on the other. Was Dilthey not hoping to provide a hermeneutic version of a transcendentalist foundation of history?

When taking this lead we should remember that Mink had deep admiration for Arthur Danto's classic *Analytical Philosophy of History* of 1965. In that book, Danto introduced the notions of so-called project verbs and of narrative sentences. One cannot properly understand Mink's account of historical time without keeping these two ideas in mind. Project verbs are verbs as used in phrases like "planting roses," "building a ship," or "writing a book." Of interest to Danto is the fact that we may use these verbs to describe the actions of people with a view to an as yet indefinite future. Suppose somebody is putting rose seeds into the soil behind his house. We could then properly describe his action—his "project," as Danto would have it—as "planting roses," notwithstanding the possibility that because of a drought these seeds may never actually grow into roses. And of course a similar story could be told about someone writing a book. In this way there is a potential asymmetry between our description of what this man is doing right now on the one hand and what may or may not be the actual results of his actions on the other. We say that he is planting roses, whereas history (or rather, the future) may show that he did not end up planting roses, since the seeds died in the soil. In this way, a potential tension or asymmetry arises between the language we happen to use and actual courses of events. The fascinating implication is that these project verbs suggest how history may come into being, for we happen to use a kind of language (i.e., the language of project verbs) that may be belied by what history actually is or will be like. History emerges in the tension between the use of these project verbs and what has actually happened. Without the project verbs, with

their implicit reference to the future, language would always reassuringly correspond with what actually happens—and history would never manifest itself in language.[17]

Furthermore, Danto often speaks of "temporal wholes" when discussing the logical features of the project verbs.[18] This notion makes intuitive sense, for does the temporal interval between the planting of seeds and the growing up of the roses not constitute a temporal whole? Hence it seems natural to associate the historical dimension of the project verbs with these temporal wholes. And this, indeed, is how Danto's argument is often read and interpreted. But we should reject this interpretation. In fact history does not enter the scene with these temporal wholes as such but only with the potential *discrepancy* between expectations about the future, as suggested by the temporal wholes, and the actual historical course of events. History comes into being where language has wrong-footed us, so to speak.

To appreciate this point, it helps to recall the familiar notion of the "unintended consequences of intentional human action," which played such an important role in Hegel's philosophy of history.[19] This, incidentally, is another example of the need to translate what historicists such as Hegel write about the *past* into statements about the use of *language* in historical writing. To take a famous example, in his capacity as adviser to Pope Clement VII, Francesco Guicciardini urged the pope to join an alliance directed against Emperor Charles V. The ultimate result of this policy, however, was the sack of Rome in 1527. For the rest of his life Guicciardini bitterly grieved about the disastrous consequences of what had initially seemed to him a most ratio-

17. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge. With a new introduction by Lydia Goehr and a new conclusion by Frank Ankersmit* (New York, 2007), 159 ff.

18. E.g., Danto, *Narration and Knowledge,* 183 ff.

19. "Jener Zusammanhang enthält nämlich dies, dass in der Welgeschichte durch die Handlungen der Menschen noch etwas anderes überhaupt herauskomme, als sie bezwecken und erreichen, als sie unmittelbar wissen und wollen. Sie vollbringen ihr Interesse; aber es wird noch ein Ferneres damit zustande gebracht, das auch innerlich darin liegt, aber das nicht in ihrem Bewusstsein und Absicht lag." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte,* vol. 1, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Hamburg, 1970), 88. Reason uses this discrepancy between intention and unintended results for the insidious realization of its own purposes; Hegel speaks here of "the cunning of Reason." Half a century before Hegel the point had already been made most eloquently by Adam Ferguson: "Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not of human design. Cromwell said, That a man never mounts higher, than when he knows not whither he is going; it may with more reason be affirmed of communities, that they admit of the greatest revolutions where no change is intended, and that the most refined politicians do not always know whither they are leading the state by their projects." See A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767; repr., Cambridge, 1995), 119.

nal and recommendable policy. In this sense one may say that the brute and terrible force of history was brought home to Guicciardini; and, indeed, he now turned to historical writing in order to grasp how this fateful discrepancy between his excellent intentions and their unforeseen and unintended consequences could be explained *historically.* The experience of unintended consequences thus provoked Guicciardini's historical awareness. And, more generally, there *is* a close and intimate link between the origins of Western historical consciousness in the sixteenth century and a growing awareness of this dimension of the unintended consequences of intentional human action.[20] Danto's project verbs present us with what one might describe as "the microlevel" of this mechanism.

Consider now Danto's so-called narrative sentences. His formal definition of the narrative sentence runs as follows: "the class of descriptions I am concerned with refer to two distinct and time-separated events E-1 and E-2. They describe the earliest of the events referred to."[21] One of Danto's examples is the statement "The author of the *Principia* is born in Woolethorpe." Note, then, that on Christmas Day 1642 one might well have said "Isaac Newton is born in Woolethorpe" but not "The author of the *Principia* is born in Woolethorpe," since the latter statement could have been appropriately uttered only after 1687, when the *Principia* was published. Or, as Danto puts it elsewhere, if there had existed such a thing as the Ideal Chronicle, mentioning literally everything taking place at a certain time in the universe, it could not possibly have contained for Christmas Day 1642 the statement "The author of the *Principia* is born at Woolethorpe," since nobody could have known at that time that Newton would write that book. Another example is "The Thirty Years' War began in 1618." Here the narrative sentence contains an implicit reference to 1648, when the war came to an end, and thus it could have been formulated only after 1648. Only then could one have been certain that the war would last thirty years.

Both the project verbs and the narrative sentences succeed in uniting in themselves what is temporally separate. Language, used in this way, brings into one synopsis—to use Mink's terminology—what in the actual past took place at different times. Language here "consumes" temporal distance, so to speak, so as to survey in one grasp what may be separated by many years. Moreover, this seeing together is the home of historical insight: it is with an appreciation of the asymmetries of intention and unintended consequences

20. For an elaboration of this, see F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, 2005), chap. 8.

21. Danto, *Philosophy of History,* 152; Danto, *Narration,* 152.

that all historical awareness begins. The power of history makes itself felt only when it brutally places itself between our often excellent intentions and the disastrous consequences no less often resulting from them. These consequences are recognized only with the wisdom of hindsight—hence from a historical perspective.

The upshot is that there is a certain use of language—Danto's project verbs and his narrative sentences—that can properly be said to be the condition of the possibility of historical insight. And with this we have come back to the transcendental thesis: the transcendence of time by project verbs and narrative sentences is the transcendental condition of the possibility of historical knowledge.

Danto himself never phrased his argument in a transcendentalist terminology. This further step was taken by Hans Michael Baumgartner, Danto's most interesting commentator, in a book published some seven years after Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History.* Baumgartner agrees with all of Danto's argument and with his thesis of the asymmetry of past and future effected by the uses of language as investigated by Danto. He thus acknowledges the "essential retrospectivity of all historical writing" (*die prinzipielle Retrospektivität der Historie*),[22] which organizes all historical knowledge.

Baumgartner still remains here within the parameters of Danto's own argument. But that changes once he radicalizes Danto's argument into a *transcendentalist* analysis of historical language. The point of departure for this radicalization is Baumgartner's claim that Danto still relies on a naive historical ontology. Danto speaks about the Middle Ages, the French Revolution, or the Renaissance as though these expressions referred to things with the same ontological status as those designated by proper names like Caesar or Napoleon. But for a proper understanding of the peculiarities of historical language, biographies—with subjects like Caesar or Napoleon—are wholly inadequate.[23] This is because the unity or continuity of individuals like Caesar or Napoleon is taken for granted through the reliance on notions such as person or individual (or sortal concepts, as the philosopher might say), insofar as these notions denote a category of objects that already possess a certain unity and continuity through time. But things are essentially different with concepts such as the Middle Ages, the French Revolution, or the Renaissance. For such (paradigmatically historical) notions do not *presuppose*

22. H. M. Baumgartner, *Kontinuität und Geschichte. Zur Kritik und Metakritik der historischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), 281.

23. "[I]m Licht dieser Uberlegungen erweist sich die Präokkupation durch das geschichtstheoretische Paradigma der Biographie als irreführend." See Baumgartner, *Kontinuität,* 299.

unity and continuity (as is the case with the notions of person or individual) but rather *create* it.[24]

To put the point somewhat drastically: in the beginning there is only chaos and disorder, until the historian comes along using concepts such as the Middle Ages—and only thus, only thanks to his use of these notions, is chaos replaced by unity and continuity. By contrast, individual human beings, animals, tables, and chairs need not await language in order to possess unity and continuity—they already have these precious properties before a word has been uttered or will ever be uttered.[25] So historical language—into which Danto gave us so many profound insights—is the condition of the possibility of knowledge of typically historical objects such as the Middle Ages, the French Revolution, or the Renaissance. Hence Baumgartner's thesis that Danto's argument in *Analytical Philosophy of History* still awaited being cast in transcendental form.[26]

This is not merely a matter of getting things straight from a philosophical point of view, for Baumgartner's argument does have implications for the practice of historical writing and for what should guide historical inquiry. Historians almost naturally opt for what one might call "the copy theory of historical representation." They believe that there has been a past that they should "copy" as well as they can in the language they use for writing about it.[27] All that they say about the past should have its exact counterpart in the past itself—and language should not add anything to this. For that would be a distortion of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen.* Danto has already indicated in what way his narrative sentences will necessarily conflict with the copy theory. For these narrative sentences will always contain more than the mere linguistic copy or duplication of the past that even the most detailed and comprehensive account might provide us with. The Ideal Chronicle, mentioned above, is as informative as it is bad history. The search for complete

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24. This is the thesis I also defended in F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague, 1983).

25. See chapter 7, sections 5 and 6 for an important qualification.

26. Baumgartner repeated the same argument a few years later: "Festzuhalten ist zunächst, dass der als Strukturbegriff verwendete Ausdruck Erzählung nicht literarische, sonder logische Bedeutung besitzt. . . . Analysiert man nämlich die Erzählstruktur des historischen Gegenstandes nach ihrem wesentlichen Grundzügen, so stellt sich heraus, dass jedes historische Gebilde, d.h. jeder Sachverhalt, der als *geschichtlicher Sachverhalt* augefasst wird, 1. partikular, 2. retrospektiv, 3. konstruktiv und 4. vom Bedeutungsgehalt der Geschichte her unabgeschlossen, d.h. offen auf Zukunft hin ist." See H. M. Baumgartner, "Die Erzählstruktur des historischen Wissens und ihr Verhältnis zu den Formen seiner Vermittlung," in *Historisches Erzählen,* ed. S. Quandt and H. Süssmuth (Göttingen, 1984), 73, 74.

27. What I have in mind here will be discussed in chapter 10, section 2 as the "Magritte conception of historical writing."

correspondence between the past and historical language is therefore bound to lead historians astray. It will blind them to the fact that the unity and continuity supplied by historical language is the transcendental condition for the possibility of historical knowledge and will invite them to prefer an incoherent raw mass of information to succinctness and precision—as was the case with the French "Annalistes" of the 1970s.

According to Baumgartner, Danto himself was prevented from developing the transcendentalist implications of his own account because of his belief that there cannot be historical change unless there are also "subjects of change."[28] Needless to say, this is how we intuitively tend to look at the issue: first there is Napoleon, the persistent subject of change, and in addition we can give an historical account of his complex trajectory through space and time. The latter would be impossible without the former. But, Baumgartner insists, in the case of historical phenomena such as the Middle Ages, there *are* no subjects of change prior to, and independent of, the historical narratives we write about them.[29] These phenomena lead their lives exclusively in historical narratives; that is where they are born, and that is where they die (in cases where historians universally agree that a given notion is of no use for understanding the past). Put differently, when he tacitly postulated underlying subjects of change that would correspond to notions such as the Middle Ages, Danto had not yet completely freed himself from the seductions of Mink's idea of a Universal History, which requires us to hold that any element of a historical narrative possesses its counterpart in the untold story that is the past itself.

However, as Baumgartner emphasizes, the exclusively linguistic character of historical phenomena such as the Middle Ages should certainly not be understood as an additional argument in favor of Danto's penchant for peopling the past with subjects (of change) that are not really there.[30] For unity and continuity are to be seen as the transcendentalist checks on the use of such notions in the writing of history: in the unity and continuity of historical narrative we can discover the transcendentalist standards for measuring the historian's success in explaining the past. Unity and continuity are the products of narrative synthesis (*autonome historische Synthese*)[31] rather than

28. "Eine Erzählung vermag nur dann zu erklären, wenn ihr ein einheitliches und kontinuierliches Subjekt zugrunde liegt." See Baumgartner, *Kontinuität,* 289. See also my argument in section 4 of the chapter 1.

29. For a similar though technically more refined and more detailed argument, see Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic,* chap. 5.

30. Baumgartner, *Kontinuität,* 294.

31. Ibid., 299.

mirroring the features of objects existing in the past itself.[32] This, then, is the reading we should give to Danto's claim that narrative can explain *as narrative* and that narrative explanation is that which differentiates historical writing from the sciences.[33]

7. Conclusion

We may agree with Baumgartner's main claim that Danto's argument awaited its transcendentalization. But at the same time we should emphasize that when he made this point, Baumgartner was not restricting his argument exclusively to Danto's project verbs and his narrative sentences. On the contrary, he fulfilled all the promises of Danto's book not only by insisting that Danto's argument should be transcendentalized but by emphasizing, at the same time, that it was *narrative itself* that must be transcendentalized. Indeed, it is a most amazing imperfection in Danto's own argument that he offers such challenging insights into the nature of what he refers to as narrative sentences while remaining completely silent about narrative itself. Project verbs and narrative sentences unfold their remarkable properties only within the framework of narrative. Hence Baumgartner's claim that narrative itself is the transcendental condition for the possibility of historical knowledge.

Though I would rather avoid transcendentalist vocabulary myself because of the specters of the Kantian system evoked by it, this nevertheless is to a large extent the view inspiring the remainder of this book. While from here on I shall speak of "historical representation" rather than (historical) narrative, my main thesis will be that there can be no historical writing outside historical representation and that grasping this fact is decisive for all historical writing and inquiry. It is therefore imperative to carefully and thoroughly investigate historical representation if we hope to grasp the nature of historical understanding and, above all, if we wish to answer the all-important questions of how to conceive of reference, truth, and meaning in historical writing.

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32. We cannot properly say that Napoleon *himself* is continuous, though we may well say this of an *historical account* of his life. See Baumgartrner, *Kontinuität,* 301.

33. A response close to Baumgartner's is presented by the Russian philosopher of history Andrej Oleynikov. See A. A. Oleynikov, "The Experience of Time and the Subject of Narration: The Problem of Their Correlation in Phenomenology and in the 'New' Philosophy of History," *Intellectual History Review* 6 (2001): 248–274. This essay is based on the author's unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled "History: Event and Story: A Critical Analysis of Narrativist Philosophy of History" (Ph.D. diss., Moscow University, 1999). Oleynikov emphasizes in both this essay and his dissertation that the phenomenological approach to historical writing (P. Ricoeur and D. Carr) can never succeed in doing justice to Danto's claims about the asymmetries of past and future.

CHAPTER 3

Interpretation

1. Introduction

In common parlance the terms "historical interpretation" and "historical representation" are often used interchangeably. The historical text can alternatively be described as an "interpretation" or as a "representation of the past." Nevertheless, the two terms do not have quite the same meaning. This is clear from the fact that language, either spoken or written, is the prototypical object of interpretation, whereas the object of representation is reality. Texts are interpreted, and landscapes or still lives are represented in paintings made of them. It makes no sense to speak of the "interpretation" of the landscape we see through the windows of our house. The distinction is not completely clear-cut, however, since (1) texts (especially historical texts) can also be said to be representations (of the past), and (2) it may sound odd, but not wholly nonsensical, to say that a text represents some other text. Think of summaries. Furthermore, a portrait can properly be said to be an interpretation of the sitter's personality. But despite this overlap, interpretation and representation have their own respective domains of preferred application. And this raises the question of where to locate historical writing in the space defined by the two axes of interpretation and representation.

2. Interpretation and Representation[1]

The painting by Jan Hackaert (1628–1699) depicted in the front matter and on the cover of this book is a symbolization of the vanity of human life—the theme that was so dear to so many Dutch seventeenth-century landscape painters.[2]

One can trace a vertical line across the painting according to the Golden Rule, which will divide the painting into two independent ones: a light one on the left side and a darker one on the right. Each has its own horizon (far lower on the right part than on the left part of the painting) and its own pictorial rhetoric, and both parts seem to have just about nothing to do with each other. It is as though these two autonomous parts of the painting had been united into one by some improbable coincidence. And yet these two very different parts fit together perfectly into one completely harmonious and consistent whole. What is more, they correspond so naturally that many inattentive viewers of the painting may well remain wholly blind to what actually happens in it and will perceive nothing more than just another attractive Italianate landscape in the tradition of Both, Asselijn, Berchem, Pijnacker, etc. That surely is the painting's supreme artistic feat, its miracle. It is not easy to achieve such an effect as convincingly as this work does.[3]

The dark right side stands for human, mortal life, symbolized by a man (pointing to the waterfall of life—to where we all come from) and a woman, both situated close to the vertical line separating the two subpaintings. The man is seated on a donkey while his wife is standing—perhaps this reflects

1. The argument in this section and the next was put forward in an embryonic and incomplete form in my *De Navel van de geschiedenis* (Groningen, 1990), 9–11, 60.

2. Since the 1970s several authors, such as Wilfried Wiegand, Eddy de Jongh, and Joshua Bruyn, have recommended the iconological approach proposed by Erwin Panofsky some forty years before in order to come to a more satisfactory understanding of the miracle of seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting. The approach was questioned by other historians of art, most notably Svetlana Alpers. For an account of the debate, see B. Bakker, *Landschap en Wereldbeeld. Van Van Eyck tot Rembrandt* (Bussum, 2004), chap. 11. Anyway, whatever one's position in this debate, one cannot possibly doubt that Hackaert wanted this painting to convey an iconological meaning. The signs are simply too numerous and too obvious here to be ignored or explained away.

3. I happen to know of two paintings by Jacob van Ruisdael in which we may encounter a much similar effect—though without the pronounced iconological meanings that are so very obvious in the Hackaert painting. See the numbers 84 and 563 in S. Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings and Etchings* (New Haven, 2001). And in spite of the fact that Ruisdael was a greater landscape painter than Hackaert—in fact, in my view the greatest seventeenth-century landscape painter, surpassing in power and daring even Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain—the effect is far less convincing there than in the Hackaert painting discussed here.

how our seventeenth-century forefathers thought about the hierarchy of man and woman; the dog to the right of them undoubtedly refers to marital faith. The painting's left side represents the world after death. In the distant mountains we can discern the City of God.

One can further draw a straight line over the tops of the trees and mountains and another one from the lower right corner of the painting, via the waterfall and the long streak of sunlight on the riverbank. The two lines intersect roughly in the middle of the painting's left side and thus function as a kind of arrow suggesting the source of the light shining on the depicted landscape(s)—clearly an indication of the direction in which we should look for God. Finally, on the vertical line separating life from what comes after it, we find a bizarre and unnaturally shaped rock that dominates all of the painting; it is the first thing that strikes the eye when one looks at the painting. The rock clearly is a stylized tombstone in the shape of a crucifix—and thus indeed the material symbol used in the Christian tradition for demarcating life from death. As long as you can still look at it, you're alive, but as soon as you are under it, you are dead. In sum, as a seventeenth-century René Magritte *avant la lettre,* Hackaert succeeded in filling this Italianate landscape to the brim with meanings.

Now let's consider this vertical line and ask ourselves whether the line is really there or whether it is a mere illusion. Or, to put the question in a more fruitful way, is the line part of *represented* reality (albeit an imagined reality) or does it define how the painter wishes us to *interpret* what is on the painting? Is it an imaginary reality or the painter's intentions that are decisive here? In short, is the line a matter of representation or of interpretation? Must we place our trust in *aesthetics*—which deals with representation—or should we rather rely on *hermeneutics*—the discipline of interpretation—when trying to understand the line's status and function in the painting? For aesthetics is the discipline dealing with representation, whereas interpretation is the hermeneuticist's supreme prerogative.

It is clear that we are inclined to see a dilemma here: represented reality is what is *objectively* given to us, whereas interpretation always is an activity of the *subject.* So as long as we are convinced that the distinction between object and subject is an intelligible one, this dilemma will remain in place—or so it seems. As it happens, there are good arguments in favor of each horn of the dilemma. On the one hand, we can argue that the line must be really and objectively there and that it must have its *fundamentum in re* in the relevant features of the (again, imagined) landscape depicted by the painting. The case is no different from that of a silhouette drawing, where no one will doubt for a moment that something quite real corresponds to the line

demarcating the black and white surfaces from each other. So the vertical line must be there in represented reality—and therefore the right approach is the representational one. But on the other hand, we can just as well argue that the line is not really and objectively there, since it results from our seeing the painting *as a vanitas,* as symbolized by this juxtaposition of the dark painting (life) on the right and the light one on the left (life after death). Put differently, the vertical line is something that we *project* (interpretatively) on the painting. And then the line is not *really* there—in the same way that the faces and sailing vessels we project onto clouds in the sky are not really there. (Neither is there a real man on a real horse in the cloud in the upper left part of Andrea Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* of 1460, even though Mantegna clearly painted there a representation of a man on a horse)[4]. This consideration, then, suggests the interpretivist and hermeneuticist approach to the vertical line.

We truly find ourselves at an impasse here; nothing that the painting itself tells us can help us out. All additional information to be gained from it can be used in either of the two ways just described and will thus only further reinforce the conflict. Hence, what can help us solve the riddle is not the painting *itself* but only some further *reflection* on it—even though it remains true that only *this* painting contains features that require further reflection about the relationship between representation and interpretation, whereas other paintings might not.

Now the simple and decisive datum here is that only on the condition that the line is *really there* can the problem arise at all as to whether its existence is a matter of mere coincidence, something not deliberately intended by the painter, or whether this is how the painter wishes us to interpret the painting. *No real line, then no hermeneutic problems either.* (And, of course, all the odds are against the first possibility. For there is no doubt that Hackaert consciously and deliberately painted a *vanitas.* It is impossible to overlook or ignore the painting's very manifest symbolism.)

So the truth is that the line is *both* really there *and* something we project onto the painting when we interpret it as a *vanitas.* However, we can get to this latter stage only after having first established that the line is really there in (imagined) reality, as represented by the painting. Only then can issues of interpretation arise. We might say that, curiously, aesthetics and interpretation coincide here but only after aesthetics has kindly prepared the ground for their happy reunion. In this way the Hackaert painting exemplifies and

4. Perhaps one had best say that this part of Mantegna's painting presents us with a representation of an interpretation. However, what allows us to say so is that we begin by seeing here a representation of a man on a horse, so that, again, representation precedes interpretation.

demonstrates the way in which representation (or aesthetics) takes priority over interpretation (or hermeneutics). Aesthetics (representation) and hermeneutics (interpretation) should not be considered *ex aequo:* there truly is a hierarchical ordering between the two of them.

This, then, is the important lesson to be learned from the painting. Generally speaking, issues of the interpretation of x can arise and be discussed only against the background of what x represents. All objects of interpretation drag along with them the roots they have in the (imagined) reality they represent, so these will also have to be taken into account in interpretation. (Compare the way in which the value of a currency can be adequately assessed only by taking into account the economy that uses and backs up that currency.) Problems of interpretation cannot therefore be restricted to what happens in the space between the object of interpretation and its interpretation. The object of interpretation always carries with it a representational baggage that we cannot afford to ignore in interpretation.

If much of contemporary theory of interpretation may remind us of a ship that has broken adrift, this is because it has forgotten about the matter of interpretation's representationalist anchors. This way, indeed, interpretation will go wherever the winds of interpretation blow it, as we know from the case of deconstruction. Whoever has come to the rueful conclusion that we have acquiesced all too readily and too easily in the interpretative irresponsibilities of the past two to three decades[5] had best look for firm ground again in aesthetics and representation. There is always an (imagined) world or reality that representations, whether texts or paintings, are "about" and of which they are more or less "true" (where I take the word "true" here in the vaguest possible way); and whoever interprets texts and paintings without taking this into account will inevitably be like a sailor without a compass, to use another nautical metaphor. The failure to recognize this has been the original sin of deconstruction and of related theories of textual interpretation.

Much the same argument was put forward by Hayden White when he criticized (post)structuralism for its tendency to rob language of its signifieds, leaving us with signifiers only:

> T]he notion of the text as a play of signifiers without a signified—a notion that we must credit to Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, who promoted the thesis that all putatively signifieds are simply signifiers *treated as such*—collapses a whole series of distinctions on which

5. For a compelling statement of the thesis that the (deconstructivist) emperor is wearing no clothes, see A. Compagnon, *Le démon de la Théorie. Littérature et Sens Commun* (Paris 1998).

> interpretation has traditionally sharpened its tools since the intervention of hermeneutics. . . . If the text, like the sign, is apprehended as being nothing but surface, then interpretation can be conceived only as *labor* (endless reproduction of the same) or, alternatively, as *play*. . . . But under no condition can the text be construed to *incarnate* preestablished meanings in the way the religious symbol is presumed to do.[6]

In sum, deconstruction and (post)structuralism make nonsense of interpretation through their ruthless elimination of a text's symbolic outside. There is in fact something underneath the surface of the endless interplay of signifiers. As soon as we forget about that, there are no longer any checks on interpretation—and that is at odds with our ordinary understanding of that notion.

It is true, however, that one could have one's doubts about White's appeal to the notion of symbol here, since that notion does not really take us outside the domain of interpretable meaning and thus outside the reach of the deconstructivist's argument. The last part of the final sentence of the preceding quotation would therefore be better rephrased as reading "in the way that the religious symbol may symbolize something," thus maintaining the distinction between a symbol and what it symbolizes (and what is therefore outside it). Furthermore, we should avoid reducing this "outside" of interpretation to what is symbolized by a symbol, since interpretation does not necessarily and under all circumstances presuppose symbols and symbolization. It would therefore be better to speak here of representation rather than of symbolization. A text can be interpreted, whereas what is represented by it can only in some quite specific cases be properly said to be "symbolized" by the text. Ordinarily a portrait does not symbolize its sitter. Nevertheless, it remains true that the structure of White's argument is much the same as that of the one proposed in this section.

To put it all together into one sentence: you cannot even begin to understand a text's or a painting's meaning (i.e., have an *interpretation* of it) as long as you have no idea of, or deliberately refrain from asking yourself, what the text or painting might be *about* (i.e., what it *represents*). *Aesthetics* (representation) is thus logically prior to *hermeneutics* (interpretation) and all its latter-day variants. This is the lesson taught to us by the Hackaert painting. It requires us to seriously reconsider what we have actually been doing over the last three or four decades when debating literature and history.

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6. H. White, "The Interpretation of Texts," in White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory 1947–2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore, 2010), 214, 215.

3. The Priority of Representation over Interpretation

It might be objected that my claim of the priority of representation over interpretation applies only to the case of Hackaert's painting. Indeed, the painting's meaning is found primarily in what it represents. The painting minus what it represents is merely a canvas with many dots of paint on it. But this, it will be said, is peculiar to painting. It may well be that outside painting interpretation can do perfectly well without representational supports. So let us now consider an example from the opposite side of the spectrum between representation and interpretation—a situation where interpretation seems to hold all the trumps and where representation does not seem to come in at all at first sight.

Interpretation has never been granted higher privileges than in Freud's *Traumdeutung* (1900). So let us ask ourselves where that leaves us in the battle between representation and interpretation. I shall take my point of departure from a much-discussed passage in the *Traumdeutung.* It runs as follows:

> Precisely in the most successfully interpreted dreams one will often have to leave one aspect of the dream in the dark, since here we find ourselves confronted with a knot of dream-thoughts that we never succeed in disentangling, and that has, furthermore, not contributed to the dream's content. This is the navel of the dream and where it dissolves into "the unknown." The dream's content, to which interpretation gives us access, will remain forever without closure here; and it will run out into all conceivable directions in the weblike texture of our mind. The dream's wish elevates itself out of a more dense place in this texture like a mushroom from its mycelium.[7]

Before discussing this passage, two remarks are in order. First, I am no psychologist. So I shall not venture to pronounce here on the merits of Freud's observations from the perspective of present-day psychology but will instead restrict myself to asking how the passage may help us clarify the relationship between interpretation and representation. Second, nobody who closely

7. "In die best-gedeuteten Träume muss man oft eine Stelle im Dunkel lassen, weil man bei der Deutung merkt, dass dort ein Knäuel von Traumgedanken anhebt, der sich nicht entwirren will, aber auch zum Trauminhalt keine weitere Beiträge geliefert hat. Dies ist dann der Nabel des Traums, die Stelle wo er dem Unerkannten aufsitzt. Die Traumgedanken, auf die man bei der Deutung gerät, müssen ja ganz allgemein ohne Abschluss bleiben und nach allen Seiten hin in die Netzartige Verstrickung unserer Gedankenwelt auslaufen. Aus einer dichteren Stelle dieses Geflechts erhebt sich dann der Traumwunsch wie der Pilz aus seinem Mycelium." See S. Freud, *Studienausgabe,* vol. 2, *Die Traumdeutung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1982) 503.

reads the passage can fail to observe that it is far from clear what Freud could have had in mind here. There is something peculiarly tentative about it; it is as though Freud himself had been unable to find the right words for expressing the mystery constituted by precisely these "most successfully interpreted dreams" (*best-gedeuteten Träume*). He *named* an enigma about interpretation but did not *define* it.

Self-evidently, this made the passage a beloved topic of discussion of theorists such as Bataille, Lacan, and Derrida. But instead of embarking now on the unappealing enterprise of discussing the views of these authors, I wish to focus on the figures of speech that Freud uses in the quoted passage. It is well accepted that Freud counts among the greatest prose writers in history and that he had an unparalleled genius for always hitting on the right and most suggestive metaphors. So my question below will be what Freud's metaphors can tell us about the relationship between *interpretation* and *representation*.

Freud spoke about the most successfully interpreted dreams—*die bestgedeuteten Träume*[8]—and his claim is that precisely those best-interpreted dreams are apt to lead us into this peculiar impasse he characterized with his striking metaphor of the inextricable knot (*Knäuel*) we will encounter when trying to decipher the dream's meaning. This is, of course, profoundly counterintuitive and should provoke our interest: why and how can some impregnable barrier to interpretation arise seemingly out of nothing, precisely at this most promising and auspicious moment when we believe we have been unusually successful with the dream interpretation? Or to put it more generally, why should our activity of interpretation always and necessarily run up against some forbidding barrier in the end, condemning to futility even our most strenuous efforts at further interpretation?

At this stage I would like to juxtapose, again, the notions of interpretation and representation, just as in our discussion of the Hackaert landscape. Freudian dream interpretation is, basically, the *interpretative* process that enables us to move from the dream's so-called manifest content to its latent meaning. Strange and weird things happen in our dreams—this is the dream's manifest content—but then the psychoanalyst comes along, and if all goes well, he will be able to discern some method in the madness of it all. This will give us the dream's latent meaning. But can we say of the *interpreted* dream that it is a *representation* of the dream? Obviously not. At most we could say this of what the dreamer in his typically uncertain and rambling way told

8. Freud formulated the quoted passage with the interpretation of his own "Irma-dream" in mind, where Freud's proposed interpretation seemed to make everything fall nicely into place.

his psychoanalyst about his dream—that is, the dream's manifest content as recounted by the dreamer. But the interpretation of the dream is something entirely different; in fact, it would make no sense at all *without* this difference. For how could the psychoanalyst hope to reveal anything new or of interest to us with his dream interpretation unless there were such a difference?

So there is a gap between interpretation and representation—a gap as deep as it is a precondition of dream-interpretation being a meaningful activity at all. For if there would be no gap, there would be no need for interpretation either. We should therefore always beware of using the terms "interpretation" and "representation" interchangeably, as though they referred to the same thing.

Against the background of what I have just said, it is not difficult to state more precisely the logical distinction between the two notions of interpretation and representation. As the latter term's etymology already suggests, "representation" is a making present again of something that is absent. For example, the past is categorically absent from the present, but it can be made present again by means of a textual representation of it by the historian. As is often argued, a representation must be capable of functioning as a substitute or a replacement of what it represents.[9] Since what is being represented is *part of reality,* the same must be true of its representation—as I have argued on several occasions. *Hence, the ontological status of being part of reality is, so to speak, transferred from the represented to its representation.*[10]

We can now understand Freud's discomfort about precisely the most successful dream interpretations. Let me put it this way: interpretations are kinds of *explanation.* They provide an explanation of reality, in the same sense in which this can be said, for example, of the notorious "covering law model" (although, of course, the explanation has a quite different character there). Hence, interpretation shares with explanation the "explanatory ideal" of leaving no part of reality unexplained and unaccounted for. No loose threads! Explanation and interpretation want to come as close to reality as possible—so close, in fact, that explanation/interpretation and reality itself become indiscernible and interchangeable. That is the ideal. But the pursuit of this ideal encounters an insurmountable barrier. What is the use of an explanation if we cannot distinguish it from what it is meant to explain, thereby reducing it to a redundancy? Hence, for an explanation or interpretation to acquire the status of a representation is for it to commit suicide

9. See for this chapter 8, section 2.
10. See also chapter 5, section 3.

and to abolish its very raison d'être. So what all representation sui generis is—namely, a believable substitute for reality, or for what it represents—is what all explanation *and all interpretation* desperately would like to be, on the one hand, but never can, will, or should become, on the other. This, then, is the obstacle that Freud encountered in the interpretation of his own "Irma-dream": the interpretation was so successful and covered all the relevant facts so satisfactorily that it now began to arrogate to itself the status of being a representation of the dream, assuming this to be a feasible aspiration. But, alas, this is never given to interpretations (or explanations). Representation is what all interpretation naturally aspires to be and in which it would find its natural fulfillment but for the fact that it cannot ever actually achieve it. For were it to do so, it would paradoxically no longer be an interpretation but a representation of the thing interpreted.

4. The Navel of the Dream

Let us turn next to Freud's metaphor of "the navel of the dream." The metaphor of the navel is suggestive of what ties us to our origin or rather, of what still may remind us of this origin; the navel is the scar that serves as such a reminder. But what tied us to that origin was ruthlessly cut through after we were born. And with this we began our lifelong careers of being independent human individuals. If we relate this to our findings about interpretation and representation, the implication is that the navel of the dream is, so to speak, the umbilical cord through which reality leaks into the dream interpretation. Thus when a dream interpretation is as successful as was the case with Freud's interpretation of his own Irma-dream, and when the metaphor of the navel begins to cast its spell on us, then reality is seeping into interpretation. Normally the idea of reality penetrating into interpretation (and explanation) makes no sense: reality is, if anything, that which is being interpreted and explained, and it could not possibly transcend the forbidding barrier between itself (that is to say, the world) and what we say about it. However, this otherwise insurmountable barrier becomes porous in the case of representation insofar as representation aims at making an absent reality present again and thus at being "as good as" reality itself. Or, to put it in a formula: interpretation + reality = representation, where this liminal conjunction of interpretation and reality occurs only when the ultimate limits of interpretative success have been reached.

Turning this latter observation around, we might say that representation is a measure of interpretative or explanatory success. Hermeneuticists have been dealing for two centuries with the problem of how to measure

interpretative success—and it will be impossible to do justice here to the subtlety and the intellectual sophistication invested in that effort. Nor can the results of their effort be summarized in a few sweeping claims. Nevertheless, one common suggestion is that a successful interpretation must somehow show us what reality actually is or was like. The intuition that successful interpretation takes us back to reality is captured, for example, in Michelet's characterization of historical writing as a *résurrection du passé.* And whether we think of Dilthey's hermeneutic circle, Robin Collingwood's "re-enactment of the past," or Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," the idea is always that interpretation should somehow erase the line between the order of interpretation (and of interpretative writing) and the order of what is interpreted. There always is a suggestion of an identification with what is interpreted that would make no sense at all in the sciences. No scientist would ever be tempted to think of explanatory success as consisting in an identification of himself (or his theories) with the objects of his investigation. For him, ontology and epistemology are mutually irreducible; he is a natural-born Kantian, so to speak, and each effort to bridge the gap between the two (and there is no shortage of such efforts nowadays!) will naturally be suspected of conflating his own discipline with the practice of the humanities.

In the humanities, by contrast, ontology and epistemology are like man and wife, always striving to overcome what separates them, to achieve a unification with each other, however partial and momentary it may be, and to overcome the demarcation line between interpretation and representation. This is what the quote from *Traumdeutung* made us recognize and place in proper perspective.

This also is where we must discern the imperfection of all hermeneutics, which therefore requires completion by aesthetics. For aesthetics is the philosophical subdiscipline addressed to the problem of representation. The work of art is the paradigmatic object of investigation by aesthetics; aesthetics is primarily interested in what we mean when we say that the work of art is a representation of the world. And we have every reason to agree here with Gadamer when he explains in the first part of *Truth and Method* what was lost when Kant and, above all, Schiller marginalized aesthetics by radically separating epistemology and ontology. Art, representation, and aesthetics were now expelled from the domain of knowledge and truth; and although art was extolled far above the domain of men's daily preoccupations and elevated to the highest realm of all human achievement, the price paid for this was the complete irrelevance of art and aesthetics to the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

5. Historical Representation

It is exactly this which makes historical writing such a fascinating discipline, upsetting existing philosophical categories and accepted certainties about notions such as experience, truth, and knowledge. For on the one hand, the historical text is no less prototypical an example of representation than the work of art, in that it seeks to make present (again) an absent past—and in doing so, compels us to turn to aesthetics to explain how it can succeed in this goal. But who, on the other hand, would deny that there exists such a thing as historical knowledge and historical truth—in whatever way exactly we decide to understand these notions? Thus historical writing does what the existing, post-Schillerian regime of philosophical subdisciplines assumes to be impossible, namely, to achieve *aesthetic truth.*

Having arrived at this point, I should make a few comments regarding the notion of historical representation that will be the main topic of the remainder of this book. Many historians and philosophers of history will probably have little sympathy for this concept—at least if the term "representation" is to be taken seriously, so as to suggest a parallel between pictorial and historical representation, as was the case in the venerable sixteenth-century topos of *ut pictura poesis.* It will be objected that a historical text has many layers and that it is far from obvious that any of these shares something with (aesthetic) representation, as typically exemplified by painting. To begin with, the historical text will typically offer an analysis of the available evidence; it will discuss the relationship between individual events and all sorts of other aspects of the past; its style is discursive and argumentative; and, finally, it will take into consideration what other historians have said already about the given historical topic. In short, it will contain quite a number of features that we associate with science rather than with art and aesthetic representation.[11] No elements of a painting correspond to any of this. So it seems that the phrase "historical representation" is a contradiction in terms if we respect the meaning of the words "historical" and "representation."

I shall not dispute the cogency of this objection. Not only does every historical text contain the elements just summarized, which are indeed irreconcilable with the notion of representation, but I am willing to admit that a substantial part of all historical writing consists exclusively of these elements, so that the notion of representation is not applicable to any part or aspect of

11. All the aspects of historical research, both theoretical and practical, are carefully explored in A. Tucker, ed., *A Companion to Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Oxford, 2009).

it. Thus more clarity is needed about what aspect of historical writing, if any, might be denoted by the term "historical representation."

In this context we should remember the distinction between historical research (*Geschichtsforschung*) and historical writing (*Geschichtsschreibung*) made by many nineteenth-century historical theorists, such as J. G. Droysen.[12] Historical research refers to the historian's analysis of the evidence the past has left us. It deals with the selection, interpretation, and analysis of historical sources and with how this analysis may help us explain causally (or otherwise) what the evidence has taught us about the past.[13] And it is undoubtedly true that much of what historians write about the past does not go beyond all this. But in addition there is the level of historical writing, where the results of historical research are integrated into a historical narrative or representation. The advocates of the distinction between historical research and historical writing insist that what happens at this level cannot be reduced to the practice of historical research. Put differently, the problems encountered at the level of the establishment of historical fact—both practical and theoretical—are essentially different from the task of integrating these facts into a unified historical text. At the first level, the historian has to fix the facts about the past; at the second, he must make up his mind about which facts to mention in his text and which ones to leave out, as irrelevant to the proper understanding of some part of the past. Historical writing is essentially *selection:* a separation of what is deemed to be important for a proper grasp of some historical phenomenon from what is considered irrelevant.

This distinction between historical research and historical writing—though always quite self-evident to historians when pondering the practice of their discipline—has lost all its popularity with historical theorists. In fact,

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12. J. G. Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopedie and Methodologie der Geschichte. Herausgegeben von Rudolf Hübner* (1857; repr., Munich, 1971).

13. When describing the "transition" from the phase of *Geschichtsforschung* to that of *Geschichtsschreibung,* the medievalist Ebels-Hoving wrote, "[B]etween the two of them there is a breathing space. After it comes a new effort, with risks of its own. All hope of the story spontaneously telling itself then suddenly evaporates. Alas, nothing automatically offers itself to the mind and nothing comes to the surface out of itself; on the contrary, all that had been painfully collected together, critically investigated and interpreted loses its self-evidence, begins to ask embarrassing questions, to drivel, to irritate, to sow doubt, but also to deeply amaze or even to enrapture. The most terrible things may happen now, in the worst case everything may even prove to have been in vain." See B. Ebels-Hoving, *Geschiedenis als metgezel. Confrontaties met een vak 1950 – 2010* (Hilversum, 2011), 155. Having worked for all of my academic career in a history department, I can confirm that this is in agreement with what my colleagues have always told me about their work. So I am convinced that the belief in the perfect continuity between historical research and historical writing is a myth inspired by the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical fact.

I do not know of even one contemporary philosopher of history supporting it. Insofar as it is discussed at all, it is rejected as a remnant of a crude nineteenth-century positivism that still maintains the possibility of strictly separating fact from theory. But, the objection to the distinction continues, facts can be found and described only within the framework of a theory. So it is in the sciences, and it is no less so in historical writing: the historian does not walk into the archives "naked," as a popular, though somewhat inelegant metaphor expresses it. The idea of historians crossing naked from the street over the thresholds of our national archives is, indeed, a most unappetizing prospect, so we should certainly do all we can to avoid this happening. And it is always concluded from these admittedly somewhat untoward considerations that we must abandon the distinction between historical research and historical writing.

Now I can agree with all of this—especially with worries about historians going around naked—except the conclusion. It is surely true that "theory" is required to establish, describe, interpret, and explain facts. Facts are always identified and explained under a certain description of them, as Arthur Danto famously insisted[14] and as the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical observation canonically asserts. However, I would like to insist that this interaction of fact and theory should be seen as restricted to the level of historical research only. Facts are indeed not pre-theoretically given to the historian. But this does not compel us to reduce the level of historical writing to that of historical research. This conclusion would follow only if what is expressed at the level of historical writing were considered to be the representation of one Big Historical Fact. The intuition would be that the particular components of the historical text account for various minor facts, while the text as a whole accounts for one Big Historical Fact (presumably consisting of all these minor facts added together). And then the reach of the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical facts could be extended, so it might seem, from minor facts to the level of these Big Historical Facts (and hence to that of historical writing).

But the very idea of this Big Historical Fact can be diagnosed as one more paradigmatic manifestation of Mink's Universal History syndrome.[15] There are no such Big Historical Facts, and applying the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical fact to them (and hence to the level of historical

14. A. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York 2007), 218–223.

15. L. O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in Mink, *Historical Understanding,* ed. Brian Fay, Eugene Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca, 1987), 182–204; see there especially Mink's argument against Universal History. See also chapter 2.

writing) is quite misguided. The distinction between historical research and historical writing is truly unassailable. And the level of historical writing cannot be reduced to that of historical research—though, again, nothing is necessarily wrong with the historian's preferring to avoid historical writing altogether.

In this book I will use the notion of historical representation to refer to the level of historical writing, as distinct from that of historical research. Historical representation concerns the issue of the historical text as a whole, rather than just its component parts. The term is meant to reflect the fact that the relationship between the historical text (as a whole) and historical reality is basically aesthetic in the same way that this can be said of the work of art. But to equate in this way historical representation and the work of art should by no means be taken as an abandonment of the historian's cognitive aims and pretensions. To put it metaphorically, when I equate art and historiography, this constitutes an invasion of art and aesthetics by historical rationality rather than the reverse. Historical writing and representation have not, until now, been given the attention they deserve because historical theorists feared to stray from the path of truth either by indulging in aestheticist seductions or, inversely, by abandoning themselves to the lustful liberation from all the constraints of truth.

However, the specific interest of historical writing lies precisely in its combination of aesthetics and truth. If we wish to discover the secrets of aesthetic truth, historical writing is the key.[16] This is why the problems of historical writing are of interest not only to the historical theorist but to all of philosophy. Historical writing makes us aware of the existence of an aesthetic rationality independent from the scientific rationality that has been investigated so eagerly for more than a century by philosophers of language and of science. Whereas the search for the aesthetic truth of the work of art is like entering a philosophical labyrinth, where we lose our way almost as soon as we have started—if only because much of art itself already rejects that search as a philistine aberration—historical representation serves no other purpose than to discover the truth about the past.

6. Conclusion

Two conclusions have been reached in this chapter. First, we should distinguish between interpretation and representation and, more specifically, avoid

16. See for this chapter 6.

looking at the historical text from the perspective of interpretation only. Second, representation takes priority over interpretation in the historical text: there can be interpretation only after there has first been a representation and therefore an either real or imaginary reality represented by the text. Needless to say, this permanently present "memory" of a represented reality occasioned by representation will limit the freedom of maneuver of the practice of interpretation. When we interpret a text, we can never wholly discard an image, however unclear and imperfect, of what the text might be "true" of.[17]

It follows that historical writing is primarily a representational discipline. Since aesthetics is the philosophical subdiscipline investigating representation, the account of historical writing proposed in this book is basically aestheticist.

17. See for the truth of the historical text chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4

Representation

1. Introduction

If we must distinguish between interpretation and representation, and if the historical text should be seen primarily as a representation of some part of the past, it follows that a closer analysis of the notion of (historical) representation is necessary for a sound understanding of what a historical text is and of how it relates to what it represents. This is what will be at stake in this chapter and in chapters 5 through 7. This chapter will focus on the notion of (historical) representation itself. In the next three that notion will be further analyzed from the perspectives of (1) reference, (2) truth, and (3) meaning. In the course of my argument in these four chapters—which together form the central part of this book—it will become clear that meaning is more basic than reference and truth in (historical) representation. It follows that meaning must necessarily remain undefined in my account (assuming that truth and reference are the only candidates for defining meaning). For if it could be defined in terms of one or both of these, truth and/or reference would necessarily be more basic than meaning. This may also explain the retrogression of my argument in these four chapters—from representation via reference and truth to meaning. What is conceptually most basic must remain undefined and can be properly understood only after it has been demonstrated how reference and truth refer us to something more basic than themselves.

2. Representation and Description

The point of departure is the claim that we should strictly distinguish between description and representation.[1] In the case of true descriptions—think of statements of the form "A is ϕ"—one can always clearly distinguish between that part of the statement that exclusively refers and another, predicate part exclusively attributing some property to the object that the statement refers to. In statements such as "A is ϕ," the term "A" refers to some object in the world—where "reference" is understood according to common usage in the philosophy of language as "picking out uniquely"—whereas the phrase ". . . is ϕ" attributes the property ϕ to A. The operation of reference (the topic of chapter 5) or of picking out uniquely, can be performed by (logical) proper names such as Louis XIV or by uniquely identifying descriptions such as "the man who first set foot on the moon." This picking out uniquely is truly crucial for a description's being capable of being either true or false; as long as we cannot be sure what object in the world the statement or description refers to, we cannot decide about propositional truth or falsity. If the condition of this unique picking out is satisfied, one may turn to the object referred to in the statement and ask whether it possesses the property. If it does, the statement or description is true; if it does not, the statement is false.

So the logical form of the true statement (or description) implies a specific ontology: the ontology of a world made up of identifiable unique objects, to which we can ascribe certain properties using the predicates of true statements whose subject terms refer to those objects. This is where Nietzsche is strangely in agreement with Sir Peter Frederick Strawson of *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics.* Existence derives from truth and falsity; and reality is what our true statements, either singular or universal, are true of (Quine). Much of twentieth-century philosophy of language has been an investigation of all the complications to which this simple picture gives rise. But I am convinced that all that has been said about this since the days of Frege could never be construed as a refutation of the admittedly quite elementary scheme sketched just now. The scheme defines how in epistemology and ontology the use of the notions of truth and falsity is operationalized—even though in practicing the philosophy of language and of science, we may move into realms quite remote from that most elementary one of the singular true statement.

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1. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), chap. 1.

But the case of representation is quite different. Think of painting—more specifically, of a painted portrait representing a person. In a portrait one cannot distinguish between spots of paint that exclusively refer and other spots of paint that exclusively attribute certain properties to the sitter. The distinction makes no sense in the case of portrait painting. Thus pictorial representation is essentially different from description, considered from a logical point of view. And the same is true for historical representation.[2] In both cases reference and attribution cannot be clearly differentiated from each other. Think of a book on the French Revolution. There you cannot pinpoint those chapters, sections, paragraphs, or sentences that *exclusively* refer to the French Revolution and those others that *exclusively* attribute certain properties to it, as typically is the case in the singular true statement. Both operations are always inextricably bound up with each other here. This also explains why we cannot speak of the propositional truth or falsity of representations (as they are found in portraits or history books).[3]

One might object now that history books consist of statements about the past and that these are our guide for how to distinguish between reference and attribution in historical representation. But how can we make the transition from the level of the statement to that of representation? Perhaps by equating the referent of a historical representation with that of its statements? Certainly, it would make no sense to say that a historical representation refers to something that none of its statements refers to. However, as everyone with an even minimal acquaintance with history books will know, the subjects terms of the statements of a historical representation typically refer to a wide variety of things. And which is then the most likely candidate to serve as the historical representation's object of reference? Perhaps the one most frequently mentioned in that representation's statements? But should we not also take into account the relative importance of that representation's objects of reference? And how can we then weigh frequency against relative importance? Above all, was a historical text ever read in this way? Clearly not. Moreover, much the same story can be told for attribution.

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2. Ricoeur also emphasizes the logical equivalence of (historical) representation and the image (though without really giving an argument for his view): "[A] chiasmus is established that makes pictures speak and the narrative show, each mode of representation finding its most specific, its ownmost effect in the domain of the other. Thus we say ourselves that we read a painting." See P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 2004), 267.

3. Unless the notion of truth is redefined in such a way that it is made to fit the case of historical representation. In chapter 6 a definition of representational truth will be proposed; in chapter 7 we will see where it differs from propositional truth, though the latter is reducible to the former.

We must therefore cast aside the model of the true statement as soon as we make the transition to the level of the representational use of language.[4] For in that case one can no longer discern between reference and attribution; there are no A's and ϕ's whose reference, meaning, and content can be fixed with any degree of precision. The result is that one cannot say whether this piece of language (representation) is true or false. Suppose you could nevertheless not resist the temptation to do so: what evidence might then support your claims to truth or falsity? I hasten to add that this certainly does not mean that no rational arguments can be given for preferring one representation (for example, of the French Revolution) to another. All I am saying is that the criteria of *propositional* truth and falsity will be of no help here—so we will instead have to look for *other* criteria, ones that *are* applicable to historical representations of the past. And that search will indeed yield an alternative to propositional truth, as we shall find in chapter 6.

It might now be argued that since reference and attribution cannot be distinguished in the case of portrait painting, these two logical operations take place there at one and the same time, and that it is the marvel of representation (as opposed to true description) that it somehow succeeds in pulling together reference and attribution into one procedure. But this would then be all there is to representation: it accomplishes in one step what description does in two. Hence, from a logical point of view, there should be no real difference between description and representation. Both can be reduced to the notions of reference and attribution. And it would follow that as far as reference is concerned, there are no interesting logical differences between

4. The antiepistemological tendencies in the writings of Quine, Davidson, and Rorty have often been referred to as "antirepresentationalism." This term is meant here to be a criticism of epistemological claims about what I have been calling "true description." So what is ordinarily understood by antirepresentationalism should not be misunderstood as a rejection of what I am here calling representation. In fact, this specific notion of representation is unknown in the existing philosophy of language. In that respect, this book can be seen as an invitation to philosophers of language to explore new territory—namely, that of the historical text. But one further observation is relevant here. One cannot fail to be struck by the fact that the claim defended here, that descriptions do not represent, is far simpler, more straightforward, and more self-evident than the antirepresentationalism of Quine et al. This may lead us to surmise that Quine's antirepresentationalism is only a marginal case of the antirepresentationalism (with regard to true description) argued for here. Much will depend on what we recognize as the most basic form of language use: texts or true descriptions. If it is the latter, my marginalization of Quine's antirepresentationalism has no foot to stand on; but if it is the former, it is the other way round. And this, indeed, is the more plausible position: true descriptions make sense only within the context of texts containing them. When we move from texts to true descriptions, we move in the direction of unnatural abstraction. The natural task of language is discovered only when we move into the opposite direction. See also my *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague, 1983), 144–169.

a represented (i.e., what is represented by a representation) on the one hand and what a true description is true of on the other.

3. Representation Is a Three-Place Operator: The Notion of Aspect[5]

But that conclusion is unsatisfactory. The asymmetries between description and representation will emerge more clearly if we consider more closely the question of what is represented by a representation.

At first sight this must seem a silly question. In the case of a portrait or a biography of Napoleon, what else could it represent but Napoleon himself? Is Napoleon not the obvious referent of the representation in question, to which the latter attributes a number of properties? It would then seem that what is being represented by a representation is just some identifiable unique object in the world (such as Napoleon), to which the representation refers in much the same way that the subject term of a true description does. To think along such lines is what simple common sense seems to require. Moreover, if what is represented by a painting or a biography of Napoleon is not Napoleon himself, what else could it possibly be, and how should we then conceive of the relationship between it and Napoleon himself?

Think again of portrait painting. Our natural inclination will be to equate the represented with a unique and identifiable object in the world and to say that in this case the represented is the person who has been painted by the artist. Think of a portrait of Napoleon. Can't we say of that portrait that it is true that it is a portrait of Napoleon and not, for example, of Louis XVI? So that the portrait (representation) relates to Napoleon as the true statement relates to the world? So it may seem. However, we would then lump together two separate operations into one. Indeed, such a statement is true of the portrait as such but *not* of the portrait if regarded as a representation (viz. as the representation of a represented). There is, first, the phase of representation at stake in our present discussion and, second, the phase of statements about

5. In section 11 of the second part of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein lengthily dwelt on the notion of aspect. He is mainly interested in how we may differently interpret the same set of perceptual stimuli, the Necker-box and the duck/rabbit drawing being his main examples. But in this section—and elsewhere in this book—my focus is on something quite different, namely, on the relationship between an aspect and the object that it is an aspect of. In Wittgenstein the focus is instead on one aspect being potentially an aspect of different objects.

the representation. And we must avoid projecting the logic of the former onto the latter. So we cannot infer from the correct claim that we can truly (or falsely) state that this is a portrait of Napoleon the quite different (and mistaken) claim that the portrait can be said to be true (or false) of Napoleon. We must clearly distinguish between statements about representations (that can be true or false) and representations themselves (that cannot be propositionally true or false).

Next, consider the situation in which we have several paintings (i.e. representations) of one and the same person—for example, Napoleon as depicted by David, Baron Gros, Girodet-Trioson, by Gillray etc. These representations are all different and sometimes even dramatically so (compare Jacques Louis David's Napoleon with that of James Gillray); and if representations are of a represented, these "representeds" must differ as well, insofar as a represented is what is represented by a representation. This requires us to abandon the view that the represented should be identified with the portrait's sitter. We must reject the identification of the represented with the object of reference and recognize that to identify them is to illegitimately project the structure of the proposition onto representation. We have no other choice, for we know that the differences between David's and Gillray's representations of Napoleon are precisely what these representations are all about and what motivated the artists to give them the specific features they have. Both David and Gillray would have vehemently protested had they been told that the differences between their representations of Napoleon were mere matters of accidental detail, since they both intended their representations to refer exactly *to one and the same thing,* namely, Napoleon.

Let us now consider a set of photos taken of one and the same person from different perspectives. Again, at first blush we would say that each time the represented——the person in the photograph—is the same. But this would be inaccurate, for it would fail to do justice to the fact that what is being represented in one photograph is the person's profile, in another one his back, and so on. Still, to say that throughout there is only one represented (i.e., the person in question) is not simply false but rather misleading, since it is part of the whole truth. The statement would be properly understood as an ellipsis for the correct assertion that the represented of *this* photo is the person's profile, whereas the represented of *that* photo is his back, and so on. Each time we see a different *aspect* of the person as determined by the perspective from which the person is seen. And we should avoid identifying the person depicted by a photo or a painting with that representation's represented, which is merely an *aspect* of the person in question. So representeds

are "aspects"—which will be one of the main technical terms used in this book.[6]

It might now be objected that this distinction between a represented person and what is represented by the representation is a subtlety devoid of any practical and theoretical significance. Think of the situation in which we have a number of photos of different people. Who would say that we have here a set of photos of *aspects* of people, instead of simply saying that we have here a set of (different) photos of different people? Speaking of aspects here would be ridiculous, and nothing is to be gained from it. And would it be any different with the writing of history? Most historical texts are written on topics not addressed before. Who would be prepared to say that these texts are on aspects of the past rather than on the past itself?

I have two answers to this objection. First, consider the photos. When we say that the represented in a set of photos of different people is in each case the person who is represented by the photo, this is, again, an ellipsis for the correct statement that each represented is, in fact, only an aspect of a person, rather than that person himself or herself. Admittedly, in such a situation no actual harm will come from confusing persons with aspects of them, because we can normally tell people apart on the basis of these aspects as easily as when we are confronted with these persons themselves. Our imagination elaborates the aspect into a picture of what we might expect to see if we were to come across the possessor of the aspect in real life. This is an ability that we possess but that the other higher animals lack. Dogs don't recognize their owners from looking at photographs of them.[7]

Sometimes aspects are even arranged in such a way as to make this recognition easier than is the case with representations of the actual person himself or herself. Aspects sometimes have a more pronounced individuality than

6. When introducing the term "aspect" in this section I must warn against the metaphorical connotations of that word, which may all too easily occlude its original literal meaning. The word "aspect" is likely to be immediately associated with seeing things from a certain perspective, leading us to believe that only things that can be seen and touched can have aspects. By contrast, in my use of the term I set aside its etymological and metaphorical origins, so that it can be said, for example, that something is an aspect of life, of contemporary economic reality, or indeed of history. So my use of the term is literal, not metaphorical.

7. They do, however, recognize reproductions of their voices. But these reproductions don't present us with aspects but rather with copies or imitations of a person's properties. Notice, furthermore, that the argument does not in the least preclude that animals, such as dogs, have representations of their surroundings. They undoubtedly possess the capacity of representation. But having that capacity does not necessarily imply also having the capacity to elaborate aspects into an imagination of the objects of which those aspects are parts.

what they are an aspect of—a fact that is exploited to the full in caricatures. The big nose of a politician is enlarged beyond proportion—and you recognize the politician more easily than from a photo.

Often we move so easily from aspects to what they are aspects of that we completely forget that we are dealing with the former rather than the latter. In this way we live in a world of specters to a much greater extent than we realize; mistaking aspects for the things that they are aspects of is something that we are literally doing all the time. In this way (the logic of) representation reaches far deeper into our interaction with the world than we ordinarily notice. So here is a new task for the philosopher: aspects are everywhere but are still nowhere to be found in philosophical debate.[8]

Now consider history. To begin with, much historical writing addresses the same topic over and over again. Think of the French and Russian Revolutions (both of the latter, viz. the one of 1917 and that of 1991), the Holocaust, and so on. Even my imaginary objector will immediately concede that what are at stake here are aspects (what is not merely an *aspect* of the French Revolution but *all* of it?). But take now the more difficult case of topics that are addressed for the first time. The first book on Napoleon, for example. Would it make sense, in this case, to identify the represented with Napoleon himself, as my objector would suggest? Of course not. For suppose that after that first book more biographies are written on Napoleon. All these books then present us with aspects of Napoleon—even though the sloppiness of our use of language will lead us to say that they are on Napoleon himself. We can forgive the sloppiness, but sloppiness it remains. What about that first book then? Will it remain the only one that is truly on Napoleon himself, whereas all the later ones are merely about aspects of him? Or would the advent of more biographies of Napoleon compel us to downgrade the status of the first one from being on Napoleon himself to being about only an aspect of him? These questions are of course absurd, which leaves us with the aspect view as the only remaining option.

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8. With one exception. The notion of aspect, as proposed here, comes close to what Van den Akker describes as "showing by means of examples," which he explicitly relates to the notion of aspect when he writes, "I propose to speak of 'showing by means of examples.' The aspects of the past that a historical study refers to (the inventory of the past) derive their meaning from the historical thesis of which they are an example." See C. van den Akker, "Historische representatie en de betekenis van het verleden," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 12 (2010): 431, 432. Furthermore, Van den Akker's argument about aspects of the past deriving their meaning from representation comes close to what I will say in chapter 6 about how representational truth is revealed by historical representation. For a more elaborate account of Van den Akker's Davidsonian account of historical representation, see C. van den Akker, *Beweren en tonen. Waarheid, taal en het verleden* (Amsterdam, 2009).

One last remark on this. With respect to history we tend to suffer from a misguided confidence in concreteness. When we think of objects in the past and their aspects, we are inclined to restrict the scope of examples to people, battles, cities, paintings, furniture, and so on. But we know that historians write about many other and much more abstract and faceless things, such as industrialization, social strife, economic growth, or literary culture. In such cases, what should count as an object and what as an aspect? If we look carefully enough, will each object not turn out to be an aspect and/or vice versa? If so, then what are objects and aspects without each other? So have we not foisted on historical inquiry a distinction (between objects and their aspects) that has no counterpart in the past itself? I am ready to grant this.

But the argument is beside the point. A misguided confidence in concreteness has made us transform the theory of representation defended here into an ontological thesis. It has (1) made us conceive of the world itself as consisting of things and their aspects, corresponding to what is represented by representations and their representeds; (2) made us argue that in the case of relatively abstract objects like revolutions, literary culture, and so on, the distinction between the objects and their aspects makes no sense; and (3) made us conclude from all this that the theory of representation must be rejected. However, the theory of representation defended here is not an ontological thesis but a theory concerning the logic of historical writing (or even of representation in general). The closest I would be willing to move toward such an ontological interpretation would be to allow that what is represented by a representation can be found in what we have historical evidence of—with an emphasis on "of" (certainly not "for"), and where the range of evidence is coextensive with all that is discussed by historians, from individual past agents to the highest abstractions of social or intellectual history. Historical objects will indeed often be material things—but not necessarily. In the end, however, it is representation—not an ontological reflection or theory regarding the nature of the past itself—that divides up the past into what is represented by a representation and represented aspects.

Each representation, then, carries its own represented or aspect along with itself—much in the way that we are each accompanied by our shadow on a sunny day—and each of these represenateds is indissolubly linked to one, and only one, particular representation corresponding to it. Hence, from a logical point of view, representation is a *three*-place and not a *two*-place operator: a representation (1) defines a represented (2) in terms of which the world (3) is seen—and the point is to avoid conflating (2) and (3). I would like to remind those who reject this as a doubtful and overelaborate construction of the Fregean view that (1) words have (2) their reference or denotation and

(3) their meaning or connotation, and that reference and meaning should not be collapsed into one another. Here we have a three-place operator as well. I will discuss the differences between representation and the Fregean model in more detail later on.[9]

Finally, one terminological stipulation.[10] The term "represented" is awkward and misleading, since one could properly say of both (2) and (3) that they are a representation's represented, whereas the whole point of my argument has precisely been *not* to confuse (2) and (3). I shall therefore replace the term "represented" in the sense of (2) by the term "presented." This terminology enables me to summarize my argument with the claim that a *representation* (1) offers us the *presented*, or *aspect* (2) of a *represented reality* (3), much in the way that we may draw someone's attention to certain features of a thing. Though these features are reducible neither to that thing itself nor to its properties. For as we shall see in chapter 6, section 2, aspects or presenteds are less than things and more than properties.

4. Representation, Metaphor, and Style

Seeing representation as a *three*-place rather than a *two*-place operator may also explain why (historical) representation is often placed in relation to metaphor.[11] Metaphor and representation share the same structure. Think of the metaphor "the earth is a spaceship." We can say that this "metaphor" (1) proposes, or invites us to see, "the earth" (2) in terms of "a spaceship" (3) and where (3) stands for the *aspect* of (2) that is singled out by the metaphor in question. Metaphors focus our attention on *aspects of things* in the same way as representations; metaphors thus have their "presenteds" no less than representations. Arthur Danto has done much to clarify the nature of the relationship between representation and metaphor:

> When Napoleon is represented as a Roman Emperor, the sculptor [Antonio Canova] is not just representing Napoleon in an antiquated get-up, the costumes believed to have been worn by the Roman emperors. Rather the sculptor is anxious to get the viewer to take toward

9. I am not implying here that representation should be mapped onto how words relate to the world: representeds are aspects of the world, and it would be odd to say such a thing of meanings. So the similarity is merely structural. See for this chapter 6, section 2.

10. I'd like to thank Hans Mooij for suggesting to me the term "presented."

11. Thus Koselleck: 'Die Historie als Wissenschaft lebt im Unterschied zu anderen Wissenschaften nur von der Metaphorik'. See R. Koselleck, "Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft", in *Zeitschichten* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 305.

> the subject—Napoleon—the attitudes appropriate to the more exalted Roman emperors—Caesar or Augustus (if it were Marcus Aurelius, a somewhat different attitude would be intended). That figure, so garbed, is a metaphor of dignity, authority, grandeur, power, and political utterness. Indeed, the description or depiction of *a as b* always has this metaphoric structure: Saskia as Flora, Marie Antoinette as Shepherdess, Mrs. Siddons as the Muse of Tragedy—Gregor Samsa as bug—as if the painting resolved into a kind of imperative to see *a* under the attributes of *b* (with the implication, not of course necessarily sound, that a is not b: the concept of artistic identification, introduced earlier, may be seen as possessing this much of the metaphoric structure).[12]

The crucial idea here is that all representation is representation *as* ——: Napoleon is represented (by Canova) *as* a Roman emperor, Saskia is represented *as* Flora, Marie Antoinette *as* a shepherdess, etc.[13] Obviously nobody will fail to be aware of this feature of representation in the case of the Canova sculpture. But even when sculptors or painters are less explicit than Canova was about how they wish their representations to be understood, representation always has this feature of being a representation *as* ——. So much is already clear from Danto's insistence that part of what a representation does is to require the viewer to take a certain attitude toward the subject. This, according to Danto, is what representation and metaphor have in common: namely, "representing *as* ——" and where the latter phrase focuses our attention on an *aspect* of the world, without being, of course, such an aspect *itself*.

As I have insisted elsewhere,[14] much the same is true of typical historical concepts such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and so on. Historical books on these concepts can indeed be seen as metaphors since such books invite their readers to regard a certain part of the past (sixteenth-century Italy, eighteenth-century Europe) in terms of what we associate with words like "renaissance" (or "rebirth") or "enlightenment." Again, we cannot fail to be struck by the structural similarity to representation as a three-place operator: (1) the intellectual framework of the eighteenth-century mind is represented

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12. A. C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 167.

13. I would say that the Mrs. Siddons case is somewhat different, since Gainsborough did not paint *her* as the Muse of tragedy: it is a portrait of Mrs. Siddons in clothes we think appropriate for an actress to wear when playing the role of the Muse of tragedy. The clothes leave the sitter unaffected here—and this is obviously different in the case of the Canova sculpture.

14. See my *Narrative Logic*, 209–220, and my *Historical Representation*, 13–20.

by (2) a historian's representation of the Enlightenment, whose content is (3) what that representation's presented is.

Metaphor is ordinarily considered a purely linguistic phenomenon: the semantic interaction between the terms "earth" and "spaceship" gets us nowhere outside the domain of language and, more specifically, outside what we associate with these terms. Metaphor is an interplay of meanings—though, of course, that interplay has consequences for how we regard parts of the world and/or our knowledge of them and for how we act as a result. Taking as his example the metaphor "man is a wolf," Max Black comments, "What is needed is not so much that the reader shall know the standard dictionary-meaning of 'wolf'—or be able to use that word in literal senses—as that he shall know what I will call the system of associated commonplaces."[15] Metaphor invites an *interaction of the meanings of the terms* on both sides of the copula (not of their references)—which is why Black speaks of the "interaction view of metaphor." Reality itself does not participate in this interaction.

The case is different with historical metaphors. Think of the Renaissance. This metaphor invites us to project onto a certain segment of the past itself—hence of historical *reality*—the image of a rebirth (as specified in and by the historian's book on that part of Western cultural history). So interaction of meaning there is, but the movement here proceeds in one direction only, from language to the world. The past itself is the more or less passive recipient of the meaning with which the historian invests it. Meaning is projected onto reality. It may be that that meaning awkwardly fits with the past itself. But in any case the past will not protest against this imposition, just as our houses will passively undergo whatever color we choose to paint them. Only (later) *historians* can voice such protest. Thus in the case of historical metaphor we transgress the demarcation line between language and the world. *Both* are at stake here, whereas metaphor as discussed by Black never leaves the domain of language and of meaning. In sum, historical metaphor is indeed much like a conventional metaphor of the form A is B, but where A stands not for mere associations we have with A (as it does in conventional metaphor) but for the part of reality indicated by A. As we shall see in the next chapter, the capacity of historical representation—and the kind of metaphor mobilized by it—to cross the language/reality barrier also enables us to develop a notion of nonpropositional representational truth that does justice to our intuition

15. M. Black, "Metaphor," in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, 1962), 40.

that truth always involves both language and the world. No doubt this is a more ambitious use of the powers of metaphor than we are used to from contemporary theorists of metaphor such as Max Black, Mary Hesse, Donald Davidson, Samuel Levin, or George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

We can rephrase this argument as follows. Metaphor and representation each propose a certain way of looking at part of (past) reality. This might invite the view that a representation's presented is (exclusively) a way of looking at the world. Since the phrase "a way of looking at the world" is vague and imprecise, this claim is not, strictly speaking, incorrect. Yet it may mislead. We primarily associate ways of looking at x with our own attitudes toward x rather than with x itself or any part of it. Seeing Saskia as Flora we can meaningfully attribute to Rembrandt only and not to Saskia (unless she herself is looking at the painting in question). But this would seem to conflict not only with our observation in the previous section that the presented is part of the reality represented by a representation—hence part of reality *itself*—but also with what was said just now about historical metaphor's capacity to bridge the language/reality gap. Just as the presented of this photo is a person's back itself and that of some other this same person's front, so does historical metaphor refer us to past reality itself. In sum, both representation and historical metaphor cross the language/world barrier, and both do so in much the same way.

5. Language and Reality

These observations add urgency to the question of the nature of the relationship between language and reality in the case of historical metaphor, as well as between the object of representation and the presented of that representation. What exactly are we doing when we allow metaphor and representation to bridge the gap between language and the world and set out upon the unlikely path of comparing *things* to *words?*

Since Danto is not very helpful about this, we had better turn to Nelson Goodman's theory of representation, as formulated in his *Languages of Art* (1976). I have in mind here Goodman's critique of the resemblance theory of representation, according to which a representation must resemble what it represents.[16] A portrait should resemble its sitter. If it does not, it fails to be an acceptable portrait of the sitter. According to Goodman, the main short-

16. N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1976), 39, 40. See chapter 8 for a further clarification of this theory.

coming of the resemblance theory is that it is naive, or essentially incomplete, since it fails to mention that the assertion that a representation should resemble what it represents presupposes that we possess some notational system that defines what *counts* as resemblance. Think of mapmaking. There are many ways for projecting the globe onto the two-dimensional plane of a map: azimuthal projection (orthogonal and equivalent), equidistant azimuthal projection, stereographical projection, conical projection, cylindrical projection, Mercator projection, etc. We can claim that some spot on the globe is correctly represented by the map only if we take into account which system of projection has been applied. This, more or less, is what Goodman had in mind with his notational systems.

The crucial fact is that our choice for or against a certain notational system is not dictated by what the world itself is like: the globe (or the world) cannot be the arbiter between the notational (or projection) systems x and y. This is what the resemblance theory fails to see—namely, the fact that the indisputable truth that representations should accurately and truthfully represent the world still leaves undecided the question *how* the world should be represented. The world simply *is*—so it is *for us* to decide, on the basis of considerations of convenience, custom, efficiency, representational elegance, etc., what notational system to adopt. Think, furthermore, of style in painting, which we should primarily associate with Goodman's notational systems in the world of art and aesthetic representation. The idea that style has no *fundamentum in re* is not controversial. Reality does not dictate in what style it should be represented. Instead, this is for the painter to decide (if it ever *is* a decision). Yet we also know that style often contributes more to a painting's meaning than what is depicted in it. Style, not content, enables us to distinguish great painters from their less talented colleagues. So there is an important (perhaps even uniquely important) component in pictorial representation that has no *fundamentum in re,* that cannot be tested against reality, but that is nevertheless decisive for the painting's meaning and artistic value—to be found in what the representation presents (not to be confused, again, with what is represented by the painting).

This adds one more item to our list of differences between description and representation. In both cases there are certain rules specifying how to relate language and the world. In the case of description these are the semantic rules that define the conditions of propositional truth. In the case of representation they are rules for relating the objects, or parts of the world, to the represented. The latter are what Goodman had in mind with his concept of notational systems (or style). So at this level there is, indeed, common ground between the two.

The difference, however, is a difference in emphasis. In the case of (true) description, the rules are intersubjectively accepted—and thus we can establish intersubjectively whether some statement (or theory) relying on them is true or false. In the case of representation, on the contrary, there is no general agreement about these notational systems: it is *they* that are at stake. We project them onto the world—just as we project meaning on the past, through both historical metaphor and representation. And we do not then ask ourselves whether, given a certain notational system or style, the painter has correctly represented part of the world. That is the type of question that belongs to the sciences, not to art (or to the history of art). Not truth but style is what counts there.[17] Or rather, it is the resemblance theory of representation that makes us look for truth where style has taken its place.[18] The resemblance theory requires us to focus on the relationship between the represented and its representation. It leaves no room for what is presented by a representation. And, indeed, it is only the presented that can account for representational style—since showing the world in terms of certain aspects of it is just what we can properly call a representation's *style*.[19]

So in the case of both historical metaphor and representation we look at the relationship between language and the world from a perspective lying outside both. We take, as it were, a step backwards, a step outside the domain of both language and the world; we then momentarily move to a point of view from where we can ponder their relationship *for this specific case*. We thus ask ourselves what chunk of language will best fit with this chunk of reality; and if epistemology is the philosophical subdiscipline that investigates how language and reality are related to each other, one might say that both

17. I do not want to rule out the possibility that under certain circumstances what is normal in art (and history, as we shall see) may also occur in the sciences. Perhaps one could say (though this is certainly not my own view) that in Thomas Kuhn's scientific revolutions scientific notational systems suddenly lose their customary self-evidence and temporarily become more important than truth. Science would then be representational rather than descriptivist. But even if this risky view may be attractive to some, nobody can deny that such crises are extremely rare in the sciences and that we should refrain from seeing them as part of the logic of scientific discovery for much the same reasons that the notion of revolution is a poor model for understanding contemporary society.

18. We shall find in chapter 6, however, that we can conceive of a definition of truth that can be reconciled with the notion of style as discussed here.

19. Reformulating this argument by saying that a representation's style makes us focus on aspects of a part of the world that can "stand for," or be "substituted" for, that part of the world itself is likely to remind us of the substitution theory of representation, according to which a representation is a *substitute* for what it represents. But in line with my argument in this chapter, the substitution theory should be specified further by insisting that not representations themselves but their presenteds are that which is substituted for what is represented by representations.

metaphor and representation present us with something like an instant epistemology (obviously at odds with the pretensions of all epistemology) for each of those quite specific chunks of reality that individual metaphors and representations are about. To put it differently, the historian composing his historical representations is in fact engaging in a particularized epistemology (or philosophy of science or history) by answering *for one quite specific case* the epistemological question of how language and reality are properly related to each other. So this is where Benedetto Croce may have been right, after all, with his claim that the profession of the philosopher and that of the historian intersect.

6. Aboutness

The foregoing argument could be rephrased by saying that the historical text—at the level of historical representation, as opposed to that of historical research—is a "speaking about speaking": it speaks about how to relate speech to the world. This may remind us of what Quine referred to as "semantic ascent": "Einstein's theory of relativity was accepted in consequence not just of reflections on time, light, headlong bodies, and the perturbations of Mercury, but of reflections on the theory itself, as discourse, and its simplicity in comparison with alternative theories."[20]

Semantic ascent moves us to reflections on time, light, headlong bodies, and so on, where we occupy a position located both outside theories about time, light, headlong bodies, and so on and outside these things themselves. Hence semantic ascent is not a speaking about (things in the world) in the way that theories about these things speak about them but a speaking about speaking in the same sense in which this is true of historical representation, as we saw at the end of the previous section.

I propose the term "aboutness" for characterizing this speaking about speaking. Aboutness suggests a certain indirectness, which is in keeping with the fact that in both semantic ascent and the case of representation we speak about the world only indirectly, via a way of speaking that *is* directly tied to the world.

What I have just said might misleadingly suggest a severance of all ties between representation (speaking about speaking) and the world, or the past. But that would be wrong. For this speaking about speaking, at the level of representation, would then be modeled on how we speak in a metalanguage

20. W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), 272.

about an object language. And that would suggest a hierarchy where each metalanguage is the object language of a metalanguage higher up in the hierarchy. In this way, indeed, contact with reality would be lost by moving upwards in the hierarchy. But the case of representation is different. Thanks to its presented—which is an aspect of the world itself—representational speaking about speaking always retains the link with reality, or with the past itself. And these aspects refer us, to use a spatial metaphor, to a domain situated between reality and language in its descriptive use. To expand this spatial metaphor: there is, first, the world itself, which is the object matter of the descriptive use of language; second, there is the level of aspects of the world, to which we have access thanks to representation; third, there is the level of the descriptive use language itself; and, fourth, there is the level of representational language (speaking about speaking). As the spatial metaphor indicates, when moving from the descriptive use of language to representation, we shift from objects in the world to aspects of those objects and from the level of propositional truth to that of representational truth (for the latter, see chapter 6). And although the deepest level of representational language (i.e., that of the aspects) is situated at a deeper level than the highest level of descriptive language (i.e., descriptive language itself), the two uses of language never really intersect with each other.

To anticipate the topic of the next chapter, it follows from what I have said that we cannot simply project the relationship between a true sentence and its referent onto that between a representation and its presented. Reference belongs to true description and not to representation. Representations are about the world in the sense of aboutness I have stipulated, but they do not refer to the world. Admittedly, in one quite specific context the notion of reference *can* properly be used with respect to representation. Suppose we have a representation of some part of the past consisting of the sentences s_1, s_2 to s_n. The representation in question is then defined by these sentences—and each sentence changed, omitted from, or added to the original set will give us a different representation of that part of the past. Representations are therefore self-referentially or recursively defined—and it is this self-referentiality that makes a (historical) representation a *totum* (where the whole is prior to its parts) as distinct from a mere *compositum* (where the parts precede the whole), to use the terminology employed by Kant in his third *Critique*. Each sentence of a historical representation has a double function: in its descriptive function, it gives us truths about the past, whereas in its representational function it contributes (together with all the other sentences of the representation) to a self-referential or recursive definition of the representation in

question.[21] And that the representation contains the respective sentence is, in this way, necessarily true of it, since a representation cannot contain other sentences than those it contains. At this level, therefore, the notions of truth, falsity, and reference can be applied to representation. (Necessarily) true and false statements can be made about representations, not because they are true of the representation's presented or of what its sentences allegedly refer to but because they are self-referentially or recursively true of the representation mentioned in them.

The basic point, again, is that we must always be careful to distinguish between the descriptive and the representational use of terms in historical writing. This reminder is all the more urgent since by a regrettable coincidence we often happen to use the same terms in both types of cases. For example, the name Napoleon can be used in either of those two ways, and we should therefore always be clear whether we use it to refer to the human individual of that name or to some representation of him. We are tempted to confuse the two uses because we often forget that representation is not a two-place but a three-place operator, and we therefore tend to confuse represented reality with the presenteds of historical representations. Much historical discussion is frustrated by this confusion. Historians often confuse *vérités de fait* (truths about Napoleon) with *vérités de raison* (analytical truths about representations of Napoleon) by taking the latter as if they were the former. We are likely to be less prone to such confusion when we are dealing with topics such as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, since we are more aware of the representational nature of those terms than we are of the representational use that can be made of the proper names of historical individuals such as Napoleon.

But in these cases we tend to fall prey to a different mistake and start postulating past entities corresponding to the terms in question, analogous to the historical Napoleon corresponding to the proper name Napoleon. Clearly, we here have the Universal History syndrome all over again.

7. Existence

Undoubtedly most philosophers of history (and perhaps even all historians) will balk at the idea that there existed no Renaissance or Enlightenment in the way that we all take it for granted that Napoleon existed. Surely, they will

21. For a more elaborate argument in favor of this claim see my *Narrative Logic*, 169–179.

object, there *must* have been something like the Renaissance, some entity that this term refers to. For if not, there is nothing to distinguish such talk from idle speculation. My argument might even provoke the indignant rejoinder that it leaves room for skepticism about the existence of the Holocaust.[22]

To begin with, historical representations are defined (self-referentially) by the sentences contained in them, which in turn make reference to the past. The referential ties between these sentences and the past place strict limits on the meaning and application of terms like "Renaissance" or "Enlightenment." What historical representation can be about depends on what is supported by the sentences contained in it. So the notion of the Renaissance could never be meaningfully related to other parts of the past than the one we ordinarily associate with that term. Furthermore, there are historical terms we use for referring to historical individualities with a certain complexity, such as "the GNP of France in 1950," which—in spite of the fact that it will not be easy to say the final word about them—have an ontological status no different from that of individuals such as Caesar or Napoleon. At the other end of the spectrum there are terms like "the Renaissance" or "the Enlightenment" that do not have this status and whose primary task it is to organize our knowledge of the past (as expressed in descriptively true sentences) into a coherent and consistent whole. Each of these terms—and here I am especially thinking of rival uses of one and the same term—performs this function in a different way, which is why we can call them, following W. B. Gallie, "essentially contested concepts."[23] Their use does not (necessarily) involve any existential claims. However, doubting the existence of the Holocaust would imply doubting that some six million Jews were brutally murdered by the Nazis—a doubt that can immediately be refuted by an abundance of historical evidence. This brings the term "Holocaust" much closer to "the GNP of France in 1950" than to "the Renaissance." The Holocaust is part of the inventory of the past, just as Louis XIV and Napoleon are, and it would remain so even if no historian had ever commented on it. In this, the notion and what it stands for differ from the Renaissance or the Cold War. The denial of the Holocaust is therefore at odds with plain historical fact, whereas this would not be the case of a denial that there ever was a Renaissance or a Cold War. The denial of the Holocaust requires us

22. For this accusation see H. Saari, "On Frank Ankersmit's Postmodernist Theory of Historical Narrativity," *Rethinking History* 9, no. 1 (March 2005): 5–23, and my rejoinder, F. R. Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Saari," *Rethinking History* 9, no. 1 (March 2005): 23–35.

23. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (New York, 1968).

to turn to historical evidence, while the denial of the Renaissance will invite the question, What do you *mean* when saying that?

The fact that there is such a spectrum—ranging from notions such as the GNP of France in 1950 or the Holocaust to notions like the Renaissance—has the odd and counterintuitive consequence that existence must be seen as *a matter of degree* rather than an either/or question (unicorns exist or they do not exist, *tertium non datur*). The GNP of France in 1950 exists or has existed, and the same is true of the Holocaust, whereas the Renaissance is a purely representational term that has no counterpart in the past itself. No existential claim is made when we use the latter term—which, again, does not in the least imply that the term is meaningless, arbitrary, or mere speculation. On the contrary, such terms are indispensable for rational discussion of history, and that rational discussion about them is possible is shown by the progress that historical debate about the Renaissance has made since Michelet and Burckhardt. Furthermore, there will be notions like France, the Thirty Years War, or the French Revolution, whose place on the spectrum falls somewhere between the extremes of Napoleon or the GNP of France in 1950 on the one hand and the Enlightenment on the other. In this way we can speak of "degrees of existence" in the world of history. Zammito seems to suggest much the same when he says that there is a gliding scale in the "looseness of fit" (Quine) of the concepts/languages we use for speaking about the past: "*Poland,* however unstable its borders, however interrupted by partition, is not just *our* metaphor; it has actually existed and we can know that. *Bourgeoisie* may be harder, and *Renaissance* harder still, but the practicing historian's intuition needs to be taken seriously."[24]

At the end of his *Metaphysics,* William Walsh suggestively compared metaphysics with historical writing:

> The lesson to be learned from these cases is that it is unfair to compare metaphysics with the natural sciences or mathematics in respect to their claims to truth. To repeat the main point: clear decisions about whether to accept or reject a scientific proposition are possible because science is an activity which proceeds under agreed rules, rules which, among other things, specify what is to count as evidence for or against. In metaphysics, by contrast, we are not so much working under rules as

24. J. Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 161, 164. In this way Quine's "ontological relativity" can be said to have its counterpart in these "degrees of existence" in historical writing. But there are no self-evident similarities between Quine's argument and the one presented here.

> advocating them. . . . And that this circumstance does not immediately destroy the intellectual respectability of metaphysics is shown by the fact that we find something analogous in history, which is, on any account an important branch of human activity.[25]

In support of Walsh's claim I would like to insist that both the metaphysician and the historian deal in *aspects* of the world. The metaphysician does so by declaring, after ample meditation, that some particular aspect of the world—such as water, matter, mind, *Deus sive Natura,* and so on—is more basic than all the others and that the others can somehow be explained in terms of it. The historian does something similar by declaring, after having perused all the relevant historical evidence, that one *aspect* of the past is basic for a correct understanding of it.[26] Putting it this way suggests that metaphysicians have always set themselves too grandiose a task. Asking yourself—with the metaphysician—what aspect of the world is to be granted the honor of being the foundation of all the rest is to overstep the bounds of human reason and will never yield more than interesting but nevertheless "subjective" answers (to use the historian's terminology). This is also why historians rightly condemn speculative philosophies of history, such as those of Condorcet, Kant, Hegel, or Marx: no evidence can adjudicate between them. However, if we restrict the search for aspects to parts of the past such as the Renaissance, Napoleon, or the Cold War, the enterprise becomes a feasible one that is subject to rational discussion, as we know from historical practice. For in this case evidence can help us decide between rival proposals, as we shall see in the next chapters.

One further feature of historical writing is relevant in this context. Our contemporary understanding of the Renaissance is more refined and sophisticated than that of Michelet or Burckhardt. If we imagine a discussion between either of them and a modern scholar of the Renaissance, it is not

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25. W. Walsh, *Metaphysics* (London, 1963), 176, 177.

26. This calls to mind Hegel's use of the distinction between "the order of explanation" and "the order of being." Beiser characterizes the distinction as follows: "[A]ccording to Hegel, the universal is first in order of explanation, the particular in order of existence. The universal is first in order of explanation because, to determine what a thing is, it is necessary to ascribe universals to it. . . . The particular is first in order of existence, however, because to exist is to be determinate, to be some individual thing." See F. Beiser, *Hegel* (New York, 2005), 56. Beiser goes on to insist that we should avoid at all times the temptation to create some kind of hierarchy between the two orders. They coexist and cooperate as equals. This is how Hegel sidesteps the old "realism versus idealism" debate. Hegel's argument adds some further support to the idea of degrees of existence proposed here. The view that something either exists or does not exist clearly privileges the order of being over the order of explanation. It is a codification of the empiricist's ontology.

difficult to predict who will have the strongest and most convincing arguments. Nevertheless, the concept of the Renaissance is essentially contested no less than it has always been and will always remain; agreement about it has not yet been reached, and discussion of it will continue for the foreseeable future. Still, there is no objection in principle to the possibility of a universal consensus on the Renaissance. However unlikely, such a consensus could come about. In that case the historical (propositional) truth about the Renaissance would have been discovered. Then we would have one more new individual object in the world, namely, the one to which we can refer (in the strict sense of that word) by the proper name Renaissance. Statements could then express descriptive truths (or falsities) about this new thing, which would now exist in the past along with Napoleon, Caesar, or the Temple of Jerusalem.

Put differently, all our awareness of the world has its ultimate origins in representation. Representation is absolutely basic; even primitive animals can represent the world. Language is not necessarily required for representation to be possible: it belongs to an essentially later stage in our conceptualization of the world. The rejoinder that I am presenting language as more basic than representation, since historical representations are made up of statements, misses the point. Humans knew houses before we learned to build them with bricks; so we may use material discovered at time t for the construction of a kind of thing that already existed before t. And so it is in this case. The indisputable fact that we use language for the construction of historical representations does not in the least refute my claim that representation both logically and temporally precedes language. On the contrary, the account of representation given here may explain how language can emerge from a phase prior to it. For it may happen that in representation certain patterns tend to recur over and over, that we become aware of these recurring patterns, and that these patterns become ever more pronounced, subsuming the individual contours of some subset of representations. In that case we will have a new word for a new thing, and an infinity of true (and false) statements can then be made about that new thing to which we all refer by that new word. *Aspects* (i.e., the presenteds of representations) then become the *properties* of these things. This is how the things in this world together with their properties come into being, and this is the metaphysics we can all safely subscribe to when we use the same words for those things and their properties.[27]

27. I return to this issue in chapter 7, section 6.

8. Conclusion

The main result of this chapter has been the recognition that representation cannot be reduced to description. In fact, the inverse is true. As we have seen, representation precedes language and hence description. It follows that when language is used representationally—as is the case in historical writing—this use cannot satisfactorily be accounted for in terms of the existing philosophy of language, which disregards the issue of the representational use of language. The consequence is that existing theories of (1) reference, (2) truth, and (3) meaning cannot automatically be assumed to be applicable to historical representation. While this may be the case, we can come to such a conclusion only after having carefully and impartially examined whether these notions can be applied to historical representation at all and, if so, what content they can be taken to have. This will be the task of the next three chapters.

CHAPTER 5

Reference

1. Introduction

We are inclined to consider reference one of language's most prominent and indispensable functions. Imagine a language lacking it. Such a language would be useless for most of human communication. It would leave us with nothing but the unpalatable choice between silence and Babylonian confusion. So let us rejoice in language's capacity to refer to the world and hail it as one of the main guarantees of successful human communication!

And, indeed, is it not truly miraculous, if you come to think of it, that reference enables us to uniquely pick out *just one individual thing* from the infinity of things contained in the universe, from the Big Bang down to the present? You mention the name Caesar or Westminster Abbey—and most people will immediately know what unique individual thing, out of that infinity of things in this world, you have in mind.

Indeed, since the days of Frege and Russell and all the way to Strawson and Searle, reference has been a hot topic in philosophical debate, eagerly researched and eagerly discussed. However, since the mid-1970s, reference came to be looked at with increasing suspicion and disinterest. It gradually lost most of its former aura. The notion seemed ever more problematic. It was considered to be unable even to hold its own and hence to be a hopeless candidate for supporting anything outside itself. Reference began to look

like a nation in decline. Truth and meaning gradually pushed it from the philosophical scene.

A good example is Keith Donnellan's 1972 essay on proper names and identifying descriptions.[1] The argument, roughly, goes as follows. Reference is prototypically achieved by proper names. Two requirements have to be satisfied for reference to come about. The first is that the user of the proper name be able to supply a number of identifying descriptions of whatever the name refers to (this requirement took center stage in most discussions of reference). The second requirement is that the proper name's referent should uniquely fit a sufficient number of this set of identifying descriptions. (Agreement about this account of reference was near universal, while *dis*agreement about how to define this sufficient number of identifying descriptions was no less universal.) Donnellan then mentions several counterexamples: cases where the two requirements are satisfied but where reference nevertheless fails. What all these counterexamples have in common is that there is a set of correct identifying descriptions that do indeed pick out one unique thing. But it is the *wrong* individual thing. Donnellan concludes that the almost universally accepted account of reference must be mistaken. He then tries to remedy the shortcomings of the traditional account and in so doing takes a first step in the direction of what has come to be known, since Saul Kripke, as the causal theory of reference.[2]

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1. K. S. Donnellan, "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," in *Semantics of Natural Language,* ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman (Dordrecht, 1972), 356–380.

2. My objection to Donnellan's essay is that it illicitly smuggles the issue of truth into the discussion of reference. From the perspective of the philosophy of language the truly interesting thing about reference is that it *picks out uniquely.* That it does so does not simply follow from the meaning of the word "reference." So this is the really interesting claim about reference. And I do not know of any account of reference that successfully questions it. I am the first to grant that sometimes the wrong individual thing may be picked out, as Donnellan so cogently and convincingly argued. But this point is wholly immaterial. Think of maps. The miracle of maps is that they help us find our way from one place to another, and the fact that maps are sometimes incorrect or that we may misread them (as my wife is in the habit of doing) should not lead us to believe that there is anything fundamentally and irrevocably wrong with the very idea of mapping. Nobody in his right senses will demand that a satisfactory account of what maps do *also* provide a guarantee that they can never mislead us. Similarly, it is not a necessary component of the meaning of "reference" that referring sentences should always be true of what they are about. My own hunch is that when relating reference to truth, Donnellan tacitly, and perhaps unwittingly, accepts epistemology's disciplinary matrix. For, indeed, within *that* matrix it makes sense to demand of reference that it should guarantee (epistemological) truth. Hence, Donnellan conflated reference and truth, and in the confusion the recognition of reference's capacity of picking out things uniquely was lost.

Donnellan's essay also exemplifies a questionable habit in the contemporary philosophy of language, namely, that of making a lot of so-called puzzle cases. Suppose you have a philosophical theory T and then present a number of puzzle cases that are hard or even impossible for T to digest. It is then

But there was more heavy weather in waiting for reference, mainly because of the increasing impact of the philosophy of science on the philosophy of language. I am thinking here especially of what is known as the Quine-Duhem thesis, which Quine formulated as follows: "My countersuggestion, issuing essentially from Carnap's doctrine of the physical world in the *Aufbau,* is that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body."[3]

Roughly, this means that in the case of conflict between a theory and actual fact, what is at stake is not just this theory but a whole network of other scientific theories related to the theory in question. Quine infers from this doctrine three indeterminacies: (1) the underdetermination of theory by evidence, (2) the indeterminacy of translation, and (3) the "inscrutability" of reference. With regard to this last the idea is "that language fits loosely on the world"—as Quine put it—and that it is an illusion to think that reference could remedy this and restore the fixity of the relation between word and object.[4]

Now Quine's scientism is indispensable for the thesis of "the inscrutability of reference" (as it also is for the other two). Indeed, in science there is an interdependency of scientific theories, so that changes in one place will inevitably have their resonance in many others, with the result that theories tend to aggregate into one (holistic) whole. And *then,* in the case of a conflict between theory and fact, the culprit may be just anywhere in this holist web of theories. This is why Quine refers to this indeterminacy between theory (language) and fact (the world) as the inscrutability of reference.

But this holism is less plausible for natural languages. Outside science there is little room for it. In daily life facts and opinions (*doxai*) are often immune to the truth or falsity of statements on *other* (even quite nearby) facts. Having to change one's belief about one thing will ordinarily have little consequence for and resonance in the rest of one's beliefs. One must be paranoid or subscribe to the Leibnizian doctrine of the *harmonie préétablie* to think

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often concluded that T must be wrong. But this conclusion is overhasty. Think of the puzzle case of an astronaut dropping an object in his space shuttle, which allegedly refutes the theory that each thing falls to the ground if we drop it from our fingers. Clearly it would be insane to conclude that that theory has now been refuted or even seriously called into question. It is precisely the weirdness of the puzzle cases that often reduces us to situations like these, where we have introduced new elements or contexts that do not actually refute the theory but merely indicate where it does or does not apply.

3. W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 41.

4. For a brilliant exposition of the relevant background in the philosophy of science, see J. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes. Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago, 2004), 15–52.

differently. This kind of paranoia is certainly recommendable in science but is incompatible with what human life and history are like. It is illustrative of the scientistic bias inspiring most contemporary philosophy of language that although Donald Davidson does not share Quine's scientism, he nevertheless persists in Quine's holistic relativization of reference without feeling compelled to argue why he sticks to holism after abandoning scientism. But such an argument is indispensable because natural languages lack the formal coherence characteristic of the tight web of scientific theories.

The historian's language is closer to natural language than to the language of the scientist (though it should not be hastily identified with the former!). New insights into the French Revolution will have no perceptible consequences for what historians say and believe about the Middle Ages and vice versa. Nothing less than an appeal to speculative philosophies of history as developed by Hegel or Marx would be needed to achieve a mutual interdependency of all accounts of the past that would be reminiscent of Quine's holism. Historical accounts have a tendency to remain individual autarchic islands, so to speak—which is, by the way, the cognitivist counterpart of the old historicist ontological claim of the uniqueness of all things past.[5]

In spite of that, in this chapter I shall reach conclusions regarding reference that are very similar to those of Donnellan, Quine, and Davidson. I shall argue that in historical writing, too, reference is more problematic than we are inclined to think and that historical terms that appear to refer can be found not do so when we carefully analyze their semantic functions. In saying this, I have in mind historical representations. That raises the question whether historical representations can be said to refer, and if so, why. In case they do not refer, we need to explain what alternative theory we should hold about the relation between representations and the world. Hence, the topic of this chapter is emphatically *not* the reference of proper names such as Napoleon or Ranke, since these are merely the ingredients of (historical) representations—namely, the subject terms in a representation's statements—and are therefore not themselves such representations. I will therefore not (or only occasionally) consider theories of the reference of proper names and identifying descriptions developed in the philosophy of language since Frege. More than that, I am inclined to insist that any similarities between how reference is problematized by contemporary philosophy of language and its

5. And, indeed, as I argued in *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague, 1983) and in chapter 1, Ranke's and Humboldt's historicism (not to be confused with what Popper understood by historicism!) becomes a perfectly good theory of history if transformed from a theory about historical objects into a theory of the historian's language.

role in historical representation are purely coincidental. For there is little or no common ground in what is at stake in these two domains.

The problematization of the notion of reference in contemporary philosophy of language was occasioned by difficulties that the notion ran into after the 1960s (I mentioned some of these above). This problematization can therefore be seen as a refinement of conceptions of reference developed in the period, roughly from Frege to Strawson. But this preoccupation differs from the investigation of reference in historical writing at stake here. In fact, the latter will oblige us to travel in the opposite direction. It compels us to return to the earliest phase in the reflection on reference in order to find out where it sidestepped the question of how to define reference for historical representation. Thus, in order to deal adequately with the topics of representation and reference, we must be prepared to temporarily bracket what has been said about reference in Anglo-American philosophy of language.[6] A fresh start is needed. So I will not be worried by complaints that my account of representation and reference conflicts with accepted wisdom in contemporary philosophy of language. In fact, there could not even *be* any such conflict, since I am discussing a topic that is essentially different from what is at issue there.[7]

2. The Referentialist Illusion

The realization (in the previous chapter) that representation is a three-place operator enables us to recognize what I shall call "the referentialist illusion"—that is, the belief that reference is made to reality when language is used representationally. Recall the distinction between description and representation. It entails that no reference to individual things in the world is made in the case of representation. Since in the case of representation there simply are no subject terms, reference is out of the question here. The referentialist illusion makes us believe otherwise by inviting us to model representation on true description.

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6. Recall the conclusion to the previous chapter.

7. I therefore disagree with Zammito when he writes, "[M]y view is that colligatory concepts (in historical representations) can be conceived to refer, in roughly the same way that theoretical terms do in natural-scientific theories." See Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 177. But since Zammito presents his view as a matter of personal conviction rather than as the outcome of a well-developed argument, I have little to add to this. Striking in this context, though, is that Zammito accuses me elsewhere of suffering from "a kind of "hangover" "from scientism." But is this not the case with him rather than me? See ibid., 168.

It may now be objected that this is at odds with my argument in the previous chapter, that to each representation there corresponds one and only one presented (i.e., aspect). So should we not regard this presented as that to which a representation refers? Does the representation not pick out uniquely *this* specific presented, or aspect, in much the same way as reference succeeds (if all is well) in picking one unique individual object among all the objects in the world? My reply to this objection will develop in two stages.

To begin with, although a representation does indeed uniquely pick out one presented, it does not pick out one unique individual object in the world (as it should if it were to refer). It is true that the presented may give us aspects of the world, but no *individual things* correspond to these (at least not necessarily), just as no individual things correspond to notions such as the average taxpayer or this plank's center of gravity. What identifiable unique object would correspond to such notions? For example, the notion of this plank's center of gravity is wholly unexceptionable from a conceptual point of view and can be determined as exactly as one might wish if we are given all the required physical data about that plank—*yet it does not refer to some unique individual thing that could function as an object of reference.* The notion does not refer to one of the plank's molecules or atoms, or even to one specific proton or neutron of these atoms. For they are *aspects* of the world—aspects that can, indeed, be identified with any degree of mathematical precision, but no *identifiable objects* in this world correspond to them.[8] To claim that they do would be Aristotelian metaphysics and would amount to the belief that for anything that can truly and meaningfully be said about the world, there must be some objects in the world corresponding to it. But this is not the case. We may certainly *associate* notions like a plank's center of gravity with certain individual things, such as a knot in the plank's wood that happens to be located at the same place where we can situate (with absolute precision) the center of gravity. Similarly, the average taxpayer may remind us of the person P who happens to pay exactly the average amount of taxes. But such associations are entirely *ours* and are not given or legitimated by the meanings of these notions themselves. For suppose that you, your neighbor, and a colleague of yours all happen to pay the average amount of taxes—who among you is then *the* average taxpayer?

8. The failure to recognize this is, in my view, the *vitium originis* of many blindnesses, shortcomings, and inadequacies in contemporary philosophy of history. This is the throbbing heart of the referentialist illusion. But here one runs up against a prejudice as massive and unshakable as Mount Everest, as I know from my own experience. Even worse, it is a prejudice that is not even recognized as a debatable premise and that ought to be closely scrutinized by the philosopher.

Or consider, for that matter, what is presented by a map. What would be the individual thing individuated by the map's presented? Has there ever been an astronaut who, having a pile of maps of our globe next to him, each of them employing a different method of cartographical projection, looks out of a window of his space shuttle at the glorious spectacle of our earth after having scrutinized one of them and sighs, "I now finally *see* what is individuated by *this* map and to which *it* refers (as distinct from the others)"? That would be complete nonsense. Even if the content of notions like the ones just mentioned can be narrowed down with whatever precision we wish, there are no individual things that correspond to them in the way individual things correspond to proper names and uniquely identifying descriptions.

Put differently, the representation's presented shares with notions such as this plank's center of gravity or the average taxpayer the capacity to single out a certain aspect of the world or of an object with absolute precision *but without referring to any unique individual thing(s) in the world*—and this is where such notions differ from proper names and uniquely identifying descriptions.[9] This claim also has implications for how the truths about presenteds and notions such as this plank's center of gravity on the one hand and propositional truths containing proper names or uniquely identifying descriptions on the other can be contrasted. In the latter case, the proper name or uniquely identifying description refers us to a unique individual—and once we have identified that individual object, we have access to an indefinite number of other empirical truths about it. For example, the uniquely identifying description of the man who was king of France from 1643 to 1715 gives us access to many *other* synthetic empirical truths about this man (i.e., Louis XIV), such as the European monarch who informed Leibniz that crusades had gone out of fashion or "the man who allegedly said "l'état, c'est moi" when entering in 1655 the Parlement de Paris with a riding whip in his hands. And the uniquely identifying description the man who first set foot on the moon gives us access to truths such as that this man's name happened to be Neil Armstrong and that he first set foot on the moon on July 21, 1969.

9. We may therefore agree with Ricoeur when he writes, "The narrative form as such interposes its complexity and opacity on what I like to call the referential impulse of the historical narrative. The narrative structure tends to form a circle with itself and to exclude as outside the text, as an illegitimate extralinguistic presupposition, the referential moment of the narration." See P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 2004), 237. It should be added that Ricoeur confines himself here to observing that the referential impulse is misguided, without attempting to offer an explanation of why it is.

In the case of presenteds and of notions such as this plank's center of gravity, however, we have no such peg on which to hang a great number of other synthetic truths and to which we immediately have access once we have discovered that peg. For representations and notions of this plank's center of gravity never get us a millimeter beyond what is expressed by them. Since no single individual thing corresponds to them, there is also nothing that could possibly be described in terms of alternative true (synthetic) statements. So if there is such a thing as representational reference, it must differ categorically from the type of reference exemplified by how a true statement succeeds in referring to the world, because unlike reference, representation does not pick out unique individual things.

It might now be objected that representations pick out unique aspects or presenteds in much the same way that the subject terms of true statements pick out unique individual things. That is of course true. But the objection should lead us to recognize a further asymmetry between reference and representation. Think of a historical representation R, consisting of the descriptive statements s_1, s_2 to s_n. As we saw in the previous chapter, R is then defined by s_1 to s_n. As soon as any change, however small, is made to the series of statements s_1 to s_n, we will have, strictly speaking, a different representation as well. Representations are defined by *all* the statements they contain. And since to each representation there corresponds just one presented, it follows that the relationship between a representation and its presented is determined by all and only all of the statements contained in the representation.

This, of course, is quite unlike how things are with reference. Just *one* uniquely identifying description is sufficient for fixing reference. The phrase "the composer of *Le Nozze di Figaro*" is just as successful in doing this as the phrase "the composer of *Cosi fan Tutte*." We do not have to enumerate the infinite number of (all) alternative descriptions in order to achieve successful reference to W.A. Mozart, the Austrian composer who lived from 1756 to 1791, in contrast to the relation between a historical representation and its represented. In the latter case, we really require *all* of a representation's descriptive statements—since as soon as one is missing, we will have a *different* representation and thus also a different presented. In sum, the unique relationship between a logical proper name and what it refers to has its counterpart in the relationship between a representation and its presented. But whereas the tie between a logical proper name and what it refers to can afford to be the very thinnest of threads (and yet be unbreakable!), in the case of representation it must be just as thick as the representation and its presented themselves. Here we truly require all that makes this representation into the unique representation it is and that ties it to its presented. And even

then the tie between the representation and its presented is rendered indeterminate by the presence of other representations, as we shall see in chapter 7.

Indeed, all this may remind us of Quine's inscrutability of reference. Quine's holism seems to find its counterpart in the holism of the totality of all the statements of a representation just discussed. Both Quine's and the representational's holism stand in the way of the realization of the promises of reference. But, again, there is a difference. For the source of Quine's indeterminacies is truth, whereas in the case of representation it is meaning. For Quine we must rely on truth when trying to determine the strength of any ties between language and the world; in history this measuring rod is meaning. In chapter 6, section 4 we will see that in representation we must strictly distinguish between the level of representational meaning and that of representational truth (not propositional truth, of course!) and where we can only get access to the latter via the former. The distinction makes no sense in Quine's argument. Hence this reversal of the respective roles played by truth and meaning when we move from the sciences to (historical) representation or vice versa.

Taking stock of the results of this section forces us to avoid the term "reference" in characterizing the relation between a representation and its presented. While one might go on using the word "reference" here, the two asymmetries identified in this section between reference and representation in how they relate to the world are so dramatic that doing so would yield confusion rather than clarification. Again, it does not follow in the least that historical representations have now severed all their ties with historical reality. They are tied to it by countless individual ties, each consisting of some individual true statement contained in the representation. But reference, when understood in the correct technical sense, does not adequately capture the nature of that tie. Instead of saying that a historical representation refers to the past, we should therefore say instead that it is about the past in the way aboutness was defined in the previous chapter.

3. Reference and Truth

It has been my strategy in this chapter to disconnect truth and reference. Representation does not allow us to move from truth to reference or vice versa. Both notions seem to lose most of their traditional hold on philosophical realities when used with regard to representation. Adherents of existing philosophical orthodoxy might now be inclined to say that my strategy must be wrong and to argue that (1) truth and reference are inextricable and (2) the referentiality of representation can be saved by an appeal to representational truth. They may object that—in contrast to my argument

in section 2—we can surely speak of representational truth and falsity and that, therefore, nothing stands in the way of upholding the referentiality of representation. Don't historians often say that historical representations are true or false? And, indeed, is saying so not simply part of how we deal with representations? Think, for instance, of a portrait representing its sitter with a wealth of hair, even though he actually is bald. Could one not justifiably say that this representation is false or untrue? And if so, does this not imply that we can legitimately use the notion of reference with regard to representation? The representation refers to the sitter and is false in what it expresses (whatever that word may exactly mean in this context) about the sitter's hair. Does this not imply that my thesis about the logical difference between description and representation is fundamentally mistaken? And does it not follow that what philosophers have said about the truth and reference of statements is applicable to representations as well, so that the logic of (historical) representation is after all identical with that of the true statement?

This may sound fairly convincing. But complications present themselves. For the fact that we can *infer* true (or false) statements on the basis of the portrait (and I do not doubt that we can) does not mean that these statements *themselves* are, somewhere and somehow, present in the painting and that representation can therefore be reduced to the logic of true description.[10] We can indeed read this type of true or false statement from the representation, just as we may read somebody's body temperature from what we see on a thermometer. But the representation as such no more actually formulates these truths (or falsities, as the case may be) than the thermometer actually says that a person's body temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. It takes somebody (or some instrument designed to do this) who is able to translate into true statements whatever is found on the thermometer. So it is with representation. Admittedly, a representation may offer us *evidence* for true statements about what it represents—just as we can say this of represented reality itself. But reality does not state anything at all; it only offers evidence. In short, evidence is not truth; evidence belongs to the world, while truth belongs to language. Whoever speaks of the truth of representations confuses truth and evidence.

10. The same is true, of course, of reality itself: we can base true statements about reality on what reality itself is like. But this should not tempt us to project the logical structure of the statement onto reality itself. Incidentally, this ontological equivalence of representation and the world is in keeping with the so-called substitution theory of representation as defended by Edmund Burke, William James, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Gombrich, and Arthur Danto. According to this theory, a representation is a "substitute" that takes the place of what it represents and possesses and therefore has the same ontological status.

It might now be argued that this must be different with regard to textual representations, such as historical texts. For these typically consist of true statements about the past—and thus truths are provided by the representation. Two comments can be made on this. First, picking factual information directly out of a historical representation presupposes knowledge of what representations are and of the legitimacy of this operation. More specifically, lifting true statements from a historical representation is not without its risks, since their claims to truth will partly depend on the representation as a whole. Second, and more important, the basic point here is that historical representation (which admittedly consists of true statements) does not alter by an inch the relationship between evidence and truth as defined just now. The only difference is that in the case of historical representations the evidence is presented in an unusually handy and accessible manner. But that is all there is to it. And this puts historical representation on a par again with pictorial representation, as discussed above.

Portrait painting is instructive in this context for another reason. Observe that this reading of true statements (as different from the case of the thermometer) works in exactly the same way whether we are faced with reality itself (the sitter) or with its representation (the portrait): either you see the sitter and you then say, "He is bald," or you see the painting and may then *also* say, "He is bald." And just as nobody would conclude from this that the true statement "He is bald" is somehow part of the actual bald person *himself,* it makes no sense to say that the statement should be part of the bald person's *portrait.* Neither reality itself (e.g., a portrait's sitter) nor its representation actually shows little bulletin boards with true statements on them, such as "P is bald" (hence the ontological equivalence of representations and what they represent). So it would be a bad mistake to infer from the admittedly indubitable fact that we can make true statements about somebody on the basis of his portrait that the logical features of that statement are also those of the portrait or representation. And this means the end of the attempt to assert the referentiality of representations by invoking the notion of truth.

Reflecting on the previous argument, we must be struck by the fact that representations have a tendency to behave like things in the world: both may function as evidence for true statements without themselves ever being such statements.[11] It is as though in (textual) representation language tries to creep back into reality again. This may help us appreciate the attractions of the so-

11. For a different argument in favor of this same claim see my *History and Tropology* (Berkeley, 1994), 88–95.

called substitution theory of representation.[12] As that theory's name suggests, a representation is a *substitution* of what it represents (and recall here that representation is a three-place operator, so we should not confuse or conflate a representation's represented with what is presented by a representation—just as we should not confuse or conflate a statement's meaning with what it is about). As a substitution of what it represents, a representation has the same ontological status as what it represents. It wishes to be, so to speak, as good as (represented) reality *itself.* Think of someone on a long journey far away from her home who looks at a portrait of her beloved husband; her husband is then truly *present* to her in the representation (the portrait). Mere true statements about the husband will sadly fail to achieve this effect (unless, of course, they coagulate into a textual representation as is typically the case in historical representation). Gadamer spent a good deal of time and energy on this issue of ontological gradations.[13]

Finally, think of how we *experience* the portrait. We do not experience it as a composite of bits of information about hair, nose, color, form of the eyes, etc. (all of them corresponding to statements about the sitter's hair, nose, and so on) but rather as a representational whole. First you see the whole, and only subsequently do you descend from there and "question," so to speak, the portrait for factual information about the sitter. Doing so belongs to an essentially later phase—if one ever wishes to proceed to it at all. And one may well doubt whether proceeding to that later phase is of any significance for our understanding of the portrait. For the details that then come into focus have little representational import.

Think of caricatures. In a caricature, aspects of a person's physical appearance are grossly exaggerated according to the representational insight that the caricaturist wishes to convey. And even though demonstrable distortions arise at the level of truth, the caricature, or the distorted portrait, may nevertheless sometimes give us a better image of or a more profound insight into somebody's personality than a photo, or what we would call a good likeness. Many politicians and other VIPs paradoxically resemble their caricatures more than their photographs, which suggests that the representational level possesses not only a certain autonomy vis-à-vis that of true description but even *priority* over the latter.

Representation is a stronger brew than truth. Representation contains truth—witness the statements contained by a historical representation; it does not go

12. The theory's main rival is the resemblance theory of representation briefly mentioned above.

13. H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York, 2003), 137 ff.

against but *beyond* truth. Representation contains truth but may also *do* something with it. For example, whereas we can never move from truth to action, from is to ought (as Hume and Kant showed), representation can offer us a perspective on the world that invites a certain type of action. Representation is the missing link between the is and the ought; it brings us to the rhetorical and creative use of language, to where language may move us and be a source of joy or sadness.[14] Representation is what enables language to help us through the deepest abysses in human existence and to be our reliable companion on the journey through our life. It gives us the language of poetry, of hate and of love, without which we simply would not be human. All this has up until now remained hidden to the contemporary philosophers of language. So this is where representation may open up new and unexpected avenues of thought to them and us.

4. Finally: A Basic Metaphysical Fact

There is one unassailable metaphysical truth about our universe. It is the fact that the individual objects it contains differ widely from each other, with the result that it is surprisingly easy to tell them apart and that reference can be successful. As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, mere proper names or identifying descriptions comprising no more than a few sentences are already sufficient for doing this. If one takes into account the immense variety of objects contained by our universe, the ability to tell objects apart may well be considered one of the most amazing and fascinating features of the universe we happen to live in. In fact, it is a miracle. And our failure to be as surprised by it as we should be blinds us to one of the most basic facts of the world.

Apparently our universe is not at all like the one the philosophers of the "great chain of being" liked to speculate about or that Leibniz had in mind when he said that the realization of a "full universe" is the token of its perfection. By comparison with what there *could* be, what there actually *is* in our world may remind us of a mere lonely molecule in the immense vacuum of intergalactic space: there is just a single molecule surrounded by many cubic kilometers of nothing. It is this infinite number of unrealized possibilities, reducing realized possibilities to the very limits of the impossible, that makes reference and individuation so staggeringly easy and unproblematic in our universe and, at the same time, the logic of representation so hard to conceive of.

14. See chapter 12.

But this *could* have been different. Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose interstellar travel becomes possible in the near future and we then decide to take a trip to some planet circling Sirius. Arriving at that planet, we find that its inhabitants are most peculiar people and have developed a quite complex kind of social life. Not only do they all look very much alike, but they also behave in the same way, can be expected to say exactly the same things, tend to be in the same places at the same time, have much the same background, etc.

This confronts us with an unusual problem. The problem is how can we individuate them? How can we be sure that we are referring to one and the same Sirian when we talk about them? To simply mention a name or try a few identifying descriptions would be of no help here. For they all have the same name, and descriptions that are true of one Sirian tend to be true of all the others as well. The only way out is to make the list of our descriptions longer and longer until, finally, we hit upon a list that is true of only *this* Sirian that we have been talking about and not of any other. The more they are alike, the longer the list will have to grow in order to guarantee correct identification—and the more it will resemble, in the end, a history of one specific Sirian!

Observe, furthermore, that this universe of Sirians has come into being through the actual realization of all possible Sirians; only this endows their universe with the property of being without gaps. Since this kind of universe, then, closely resembles the universe of historical writing (not that of history itself, of course!) in that both are full universes (in Leibniz's sense) without gaps between the individuals inhabiting it, it follows that we can expect from Leibniz's variant of modal logic useful insights into the logic of historical writing.[15]

Histories, thus, are what individuate individual Sirians; histories provide access to Sirians as individuals. Under such special conditions, we can indeed say that reference (i.e., the very long list that constitutes an identifying description of *this* Sirian) and representation (the history of *this* Sirian that we are, in fact, narrating with this list) collapse into one another. Indeed, we could say that under such circumstances historians are right to let things collapse into their concepts and reference into representation.[16] However, this is not at all what our universe is like. As I said at the outset of this section, we live in a universe in which things differ widely from each other.

15. As I tried to demonstrate in *Narrative Logic,* chapter 5.

16. For a further discussion, see chapter 7, sections 5 and 6.

And this is why we can say that the distinction between reference (or truth) and representation has been written in large and indelible letters in the very metaphysical foundations of our universe. Reference works remarkably well in our universe but not in the representational universe of the histories we may write about it.

5. Conclusion

The notion of reference has been mercilessly probed and questioned by contemporary philosophy of language. It has generally been recognized as a less reliable bridge between language and the world than was commonly believed until some three to four decades ago. From the perspective of representation, little can be said to improve the status of reference. Aboutness is all that can be guaranteed; aboutness, however, is at most a necessary condition of successful reference but never a sufficient one. This is where the results of the present investigation into the nature of representation dovetail with those of contemporary philosophy of language. Of course, this does not imply that there is any parallelism or common ground between the two types of argument. And the plausibility (or lack thereof) of one type has no consequences for the other.

Truth and reference are closely related in true description: if we know what the subject term in a sentence refers to, we can determine its truth. But as we know by now, nothing can be taken for granted when we move from true description to representation. This raises the question of what consequences the demise of reference in historical representation has for historical truth. That will be the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

Truth

1. Introduction

In the previous chapters it was argued that representation leaves no room for propositional truth. This raises the question whether this should be our last word about historical truth. Since historians themselves do not hesitate to apply the notion of truth to historical writing and since the practice of historical writing amply supports their confidence in historical truth, we cannot leave this issue undiscussed. Perhaps we can think of an alternative to propositional truth that agrees with the relevant facts about historical representation.[1]

There are two ways for dealing with this issue. In the first place one might make an inventory of existing theories of truth and investigate, next, whether any (or more) of them can meaningfully be applied to historical representation. Since most if not all of these theories are variants or derivatives of propositional truth in one way or other developed by philosophers of language, it seems improbable that this strategy will yield a feasible candidate for defining representational truth. The representational use of language has

1. Moreover, when writing this chapter I felt challenged by Zammito's complaint that I failed to give in in my previous writings an adequate definition of the cognitive claims of historical writing. See J. Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 169.

never been explored in the philosophy of language, so the latter is an unlikely biotope for a satisfactory theory of representational truth.

A more promising strategy is to try to develop a theory of truth that does justice to all the facts about representation established in the previous chapters. This, then, is the strategy I shall follow in this chapter.

2. Aspects

In chapter 4 we found that representation is not a two-place but a three-place operator connecting (1) a represented reality, (2) a representation, and (3) a representation's presented. The temptation of equating (1) and (3) must at all times be avoided. Presenteds are aspects of (the) thing(s) that a representation represents and not these things themselves. Nor should aspects be confused with a thing's properties, since properties do not depend on representations but on what can be expressed about things in terms of statements. And the relationship between representations and their presenteds cannot be explained in terms of statements. Each representation of, say, Napoleon I, has its own presented, whereas there is only one Napoleon I who is represented by *all* the representations that we have or will ever have of him in the future. Hence the imaginary line connecting objects in reality to a representation of them is systematically more indeterminate than the one tying a representation to its presented. For Napoleon may occasion an infinity of pictorial or historical representations of him, whereas to each of these representations corresponds just one presented and hence one aspect only.[2]

We may conclude from these considerations that if we are looking for a representational analogue to propositional truth, we should focus on the relationship between a representation and its presented rather than on that between the representation and what it represents. Though in both cases language is related to the world, in the latter case this relationship is too indeterminate to permit further analysis (can any representation of Napoleon be ruled out beforehand?)[3]. In the former case, however, we have to do with a one-to-one relationship that must most promisingly remind us of the

2. We shall find in the next chapter, however, that it is not possible to fix *once and for all* the exact nature of this presented, since it varies with the development of historical debate. This unique presented is always a function of the existing state of affairs in the historical debate about some topic.

3. However, in this context we must distinguish between two degrees of indeterminacy, corresponding to "representation by" and "representation as." "Representation by" is wholly arbitrary: we may stipulate to represent Napoleon by a letter (N, for example), a star, a day in the year, a fly, a teacup, or whatever. But "representation as" indicates an aspect of what is represented and is therefore bound by the latter. "Representation as " can always be the subject of a rational discussion.

one-to-one relationship between the true statement and what it is true of. So that looks good.

It follows, by the way, that the uniqueness of representations should not be said to mirror the uniqueness of the individual things represented by it—as historicists would probably have argued. A represented can be represented by an infinity of representations, and being a representation of this represented can therefore never be said to be unique of any of them. This is a property that they all share. What makes a representation unique is the set of sentences about the past contained by it; in representation uniqueness is, therefore, not to be attributed to things in the world or the past but to representations of them. The observation underlines once again the necessity to translate what historicists had said about the past into statements about the language we use for speaking about the past.

But let us return again to the notion of representational truth and consider modeling it on the relationship between a representation and its presented. Does it make any sense to say that a representation is "true," in any meaningful use of that word, of its presented? Unfortunately, this doesn't look hopeful. For each representation is accompanied by its own presented—and that presented *only*. So the relationship between a representation and its presented looks like that between a statement and the state of affairs it is about, in which the former can be true only about the latter. This seems to leave no room for falsity. Hence, on this proposal rests the paradoxical doom of inevitable and eternal truth. But what is truth if there is no falsity as well?

Nevertheless, this abortive attempt at defining representational truth is not wholly without its fruits. For if the relationship between a representation and its presented differs from that between a true statement and what it is true of, in that the former leaves no room for an analogue to falsity, it may occur to us that the former relationship begins to resemble that between a word and its meaning. In both cases the relationship is fixed and leaves no room for alternative options to mutually exclude each other, as is the case with truth and falsity. So perhaps we erred when we assumed that the relationship between representation and what it represents or is presented by it has to be modeled somehow on the model of the true statement in order to give meaning to representational truth. Perhaps we had better model representation on a *component* of the true sentence—so that representation does not express representation itself but is merely an ingredient in linguistic composites that successfully express representational truth (supposing there is such a thing).

This may invite us to put representation on a par with *words* or *signs,* since these share with representations the property of not having a truth value themselves, though they are conditional for expressing truth. If I say, "This

table has four legs," we cannot decide about that statement's truth or falsity if we are not acquainted with the meaning of the word "table." This is, perhaps, how it is with representation. So can we regard representations as signs, albeit extremely complex signs that have been carefully devised by painters, sculptors, historians, or novelists for one quite specific purpose only—like a word that can be used in only one context. There is, indeed, some truth in the conjecture, but in the end we shall have to reject it—though not before having learned from it. Think of how Gottlob Frege, Charles Sanders Peirce, or Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards conceived of signs. They all distinguished between (1) the sign itself, (2) the sign's denotation or reference, and (3) the sign's connotation or meaning. And, indeed, this resembles the pattern of (1) a representation, (2) the reality represented by a representation, and (3) a representation's presented. In both cases the sign has a pseudopod reaching for reality and a more mysterious one in which the mental and the material somehow blend.

But there are asymmetries as well. In the first place the relationship between a representation and the reality represented by it cannot be modeled on that between a sign or word and its reference for reasons unnecessary to rehearse here once again. Nor can the relationship between a representation and its presented be modeled on that between a word and its meaning. Admittedly, it would not be wholly nonsensical to say that a representation's presented is that representation's meaning or connotation. For meaning is often said to be what is expressed by language. And expression would certainly cover both a sign's meaning and a representation's presented: it seems permissible to say that presenteds are "expressed" by the representations to which they belong.

Nevertheless there is the decisive difference that a sign's meaning or connotation is a *conceptual* entity—the kind of thing we consult dictionaries for when we wish to know a word's meaning—whereas a representation's presented is an *aspect of things* and hence part of *the world itself*.[4] There have not been and never will be dictionaries for aspects. In this way, the presented seems to hang uneasily somewhere in the middle between meaning[5] and

4. I developed the notion of the aspect partly in response to Zammito's criticism. In my *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), I had said that a person's personality, as rendered by a pictorial representation of him, is to be related to that representation only and not that person. Zammito criticized this view: "[T]he personality the portrait evokes is *not* restricted to the representation, but is of the sitter. We are offered insight not (merely) into painting but in an *actual character*." See Zammito, "Historical Representation," 176. Zammito is certainly right—hence my insistence here that aspects are part of reality.

5. In the next chapter we will see that meaning can be attributed as well to representation, though not in the sense of Fregean *Sinn*.

reference (or between connotation and denotation) as these terms are commonly understood; and it does so in a way for which existing semantics leaves no room. Or, conversely, one might just as well say that in the Fregean model sign, reference and meaning are related in a way that is inexplicable from a representational perspective.[6] So the prospects for modeling representational truth (if there is such a thing) on propositional truth look decidedly bleak.

One last refuge would be to abandon hopes for representation to somehow function as subject term or as the bearer of meaning and to turn to the presented as the representational counterpart to a true statement's predicate term instead. Again, this suggestion seems to make sense at first sight: couldn't we see a representation's presented as a property of what is represented by that representation? Why not see aspects of things as *properties* of these things? Is the back or the front of a person not a *property* of that person? Could we not say that a representation is representationally true if it correctly states that what is represented by a representation does have a certain aspect?

However, two problems then announce themselves. In the first place, just as modeling the relationship between a representation and its presented on that between the statement and what it is true of has the unpalatable consequence that falsehood drops out again with the result that we are left with truth only, so it is here as well. Second, and more important, aspects are constituent parts of an object and like this object itself they can be said to have properties, but they are not properties themselves. *Aspects are less than things and more than properties and must be located somewhere between the two of them* – which most appropriately and succinctly sums up where aspects conflict with accepted wisdom in the philosophy of language.[7]

More specifically, aspects combine the uniqueness of objects with the generality that is typical of properties. An aspect of a particular object is its back (which accounts for its uniqueness), but all material objects have a back (which accounts for the aspect's generality), though saying that each material

6. We shall find in the next chapter, however, that the Fregean notion of the sign can be derived from the account of representation given here by transgressing the boundaries of representation. The Fregean notion of the sign is an illegitimate interpretation of the semantics of representation—though it has its roots in the latter, just as theft presupposes legitimate possession.

7. This explains why aspects do not "exemplify" (in Nelson Goodman's sense) what they are aspects of. Goodman defines exemplification as follows: "[C]onsider a tailor's booklet of small swatches of cloth. These function as samples, as symbols exemplifying certain properties. But a swatch does not exemplify all its properties: it is a sample of color, weave, texture, and pattern, but not of size, shape, or absolute weight or value." See N. Goodman, *Languages of Art,* (Indianapolis, 1976), 52. As Goodman emphasizes, properties exemplify. However, aspects are not properties of an object but *parts* of it; aspects *have* properties but *are not* properties themselves.

object has its back does certainly not entail that all these aspects (i.e., backs) should be the same (as should be the case if we were discussing properties). Aspects allow generalization, but such generalization will not give us properties because these result from generalization only over objects, whereas aspects reduce us to the stage in which the separation between objects and their properties still has to crystallize out. In the aspect the dichotomy of the object and its properties is still only embryonically present—however, as such and *only* as such, it is there already. From the perspective of the "adult" objects of a later phase—the well-known "middle-sized dry objects" of daily life—aspects still await that phase of their splitting up into (1) identifiable objects (2) exemplifying certain general characteristics or properties that will promote them to adulthood. Aspects can be seen as abbreviations of things or, alternatively, as properties that have spilled over their logical borders. Both, thinghood and property, are latently present in the aspect, patiently awaiting the later dispensation of the orderly regime of things and their properties.

Taking stock of the foregoing will make us somewhat pessimistic about representational truth. All our efforts to operationalize it have failed up till now. Nevertheless, our ramblings through the domain of historical semantics have not been in vain. For as will become clear, we have picked up here and there the data needed for a proposal for how to conceive of representational truth. *I propose to define representational truth as what the world, or its objects, reveal to us in terms of its aspects.*

So let us have a look at this definition of representational truth. To begin with, just like the more current definitions of propositional truth—such as the correspondence and the coherence theories of truth—representational truth succeeds in bridging the gap between language and reality. It does so by linking the textual level of historical representation and its presented—which is, as we have found, not a conceptual entity like a word's meaning but an aspect of the world itself. However, since these aspects are not identifiable individual objects in the past, correspondence and coherence theories explaining propositional truth could not possibly apply here. Anyway, bridging the language/reality gap is achieved by both propositional and representational truth.

Next, though both propositional and representational truth cross this language/world gap, the seal of truth is found at either side of the gap. In propositional truth this seal is on the side of the subject and of language: truth is a property of what we *say* in the world. In representational truth that seal is on the side of object; it is in the world, in what we may *find* and *see* in the world. Truth is here in the *aspect* of the world that reveals to us more of it than any of its rivals. It is a desubjectified truth—a truth not necessarily

relying on language and on people's using it. Though language may be used for making us aware of it, representational truth is not necessarily language dependent. This is where propositional and representational truth basically differ.

On the other hand, when looking at representational truth more closely, one might say that it foreshadows propositional truth. Indeed, aspects reduce us to a stage where things and their properties are still in abeyance, a mere promise of a later phase, as it were. Nevertheless, *as such,* propositional truth as the combination of objects and their properties is present in representational truth. Think of salt being dissolved in water. It might be argued that then salt no longer exists since it has then fallen apart into its separate sodium and chlorine ions and is no longer bound into one NaCl molecule. Salt in the proper sense of the word consists of the white granules that we pour from our salt shakers. That would correspond to propositional truth—which would forbid us to use the notion of truth with regard to representations.

Nevertheless, we might also say that the saline solution is salty, that its saltiness is an aspect of it, and that the solution is a phase of salt that is prior to but not basically different from the salt running from our shakers. It might even be added that most salt began as a saline solution before crystallizing out into the white granules we refer to as salt. And, self-evidently, this way of looking at the matter would correspond to the representational view of truth. It is a mere arbitrary view to say that we can have salt only before it is dissolved in water (propositional truth)—or the reverse, of course (corresponding to representational truth). For this is, in the end, how it is with propositional and representational truth: they are *manifestations* of each other, just like the salt pouring from a shaker and the salt of a saline solution. To press the point for the sake of clarity, in addition to propositional truth there *also* is a truth in or of the world itself as embodied in or expressed by *aspects* of the world.

Finally, it must be added that some aspects are more revealing of the world than others (a person's profile will generally reveal more about that person than a depiction of the back of his head). So the doom of inevitable and eternal truth is exchanged here for the more practical regime of greater and lesser representational truth. Truth is here not an either/or affair, as is the case with propositional truth. But what would be necessarily wrong with that? We normally deal with a wide spectrum between truth and falsity, and enlarging that spectrum will often even enhance our cognitive grasp of the world, whereas Aristotle's *tertium non datur* must strike us as abstract, unnatural, and at odds with the realities of social life.

3. Representational (Historical) Truth

Taking all this together, we get the following picture. Truth may have either of two homes. On the one hand we may find it as propositional truth in the true statements that we may make about some object, or some part of the past, for that matter. Then we are dealing with the scheme of a statement in the subject-predicate form expressing some truth about the object in reality that the statement's subject term refers to. Language then is the home of truth—a fact that we like to express by saying that truth is a property of true sentences. But truth may also choose its home in the world itself. This is the case when a representation sends us to its presented (or aspect). For this presented is an aspect of (part of) the world. Next, both thinghood and generality are embryonically present in the presented aspect already—hence the two items may be combined in a true or false sentence. This gives us the *ontological truth* of representation. Truth here is a property not of language but of the world and its things.

Representation may make us aware via its presented aspects of this truth inhering in the world itself and insofar as it does so, representation is an injunction to say certain things about the world without actually saying them. Put differently, representation addresses the world in terms of aboutness, as discussed in chapter 4, section 6. Thus it encompasses, or encloses within itself, what can be said about the world in terms of true statements, and it can therefore be said to give us a hold on a "deeper" or "quasi-metaphysical" (to use Walsh's terminology) level of the world than what can be captured by the true statement. The price to be paid for getting access to this deeper level is a loss of articulateness in the sense of excluding propositional truth.

But if we are willing to pay that price, representation will effect a *self-revelation of the world* to us. I emphasize the self-revealing character of this nonpropositional truth. In the case of propositional truth we have an object in the world and may then inquire into its properties. And any answer the world will give to our question will depend on the nature of that question. The subject's question is answered in the same brainless manner in which an automatic teller machine counts out to you the amount of money that you had asked for. This is how nature answers the questions we ask it. But what the world reveals of itself in terms of presenteds or aspects cannot be fitted within the framework of this question-and-answer model. A representation is not a question, and its presented is not the answer to a question: we need the former only to make the past *appear* to us in terms of an aspect of it.[8]

8. The argument suggests a shortcoming of Robin Collingwood's well-known logic of question and answer. This logic may be a useful insight for the sciences, but it misses what is essential to history

Similarly, it would be sheer nonsense to say that the tree lit up by a lamp at night is the answer to a question the lamp asked it. This may explain why propositional truth is not revealing in the proper sense of the word, whereas we can meaningfully say that in representation the world reveals itself to us. This, then, is what we may call representational (historical) truth. In sum, we need representation so that this truth of the world can reveal itself to us. Obviously, representational (historical) truth must remind us of Heidegger's notion of truth as *aletheia* (*αλήθεια*): "[A] statement is true means: it discovers Being in itself. It asserts. It indicates, it 'shows' (*ἀποφάσις*) Being in its disclosure. The being-true (truth) of the statement has to be understood as disclosing-being. Truth here has not in the least the structure of a correspondence between knowledge and an object in the sense of a becoming identical of a being (subject) with another (object)."[9]

Three comments should be made. In the first place, Heidegger explicitly speaks here of statements (*Aussagen*), and self-evidently that is wholly unacceptable in the framework of my argument here. I have representation in mind here and have insisted throughout this book on the logical differences between statements and representations. Second, in agreement with his attack on the traditional epistemological analysis of truth, opposing the orders of being and knowledge, Heidegger pulls the order of knowledge into that of being: assertion is a being to the being thing itself ("Das Aussagen ist ein Sein zum seiendem Ding selbst").[10] Clearly, this is in agreement with the claim defended here that both a representation and what it represents possess ontological status. Third, in agreement with the etymology of the Greek word for truth—*αληθειά* (what is not hidden)—Heidegger relates truth to "discovering" or "dis-closure."[11] Truth is what is revealed to us as if a veil previ-

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and historical representation. Nature gives us precise answers to the precise questions we ask it. But there is nothing precise about how to represent the past. Even more important, as Gadamer insisted, the historian going to meet the past with any precise questions in his head is likely to miss all that should be of interest to him; he will remain blind to the past's "strangeness." Representing the past is rather like the discovery of an unknown and foreign country our only certainty being that we shall and even should not know what questions we must ask.

9. "Die Aussage ist wahr, bedeutet: sie endeckt das Seiende an ihm selbst. Sie sagt aus, sie zeigt auf, sie "lässt sehen" (*απόφασις*) das Seiende in seiner Entdecktheit. *Wahrsein (Wahrheit)* der Aussage muss verstanden werden als *entdeckend-sein*. Wahrheit hat also gar nicht die Struktur einer Übereinstimmung zwischen Erkennen und Gegenstand im Sinne einer Angleichung eines Seienden (Subjekt) an ein anderes (Objekt)." See M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 2006), 218, 219.

10. Ibid., 218.

11. Heidegger's etymology has been contested. In a careful discussion John Caputo distinguishes among three senses of the word *aletheia:* "[I]n the first, let us call it the phenomenal sense, *aletheia* means the phenomenality of the being, its self-showing (what is present in its unconcealment, *on aletheia*) prior to its reduction to an object for a thinking subject. . . . In the second sense, let us call

ously hiding it has suddenly been pulled away so that we can now have an unobstructed (though always partial)[12] view of the world. "Hence to λογος belongs disclosure, α-λήθεια.[13] Translation [of *αλήθεια*] by the word 'truth' and certainly the theoretical connotations we associate with truth thus hide what the Greeks self-evidently considered to be basic to the term αλήθεια in a prephilosophical sense."[14]

And this is also in agreement with what was argued above about representation and its presented. The presented is an aspect of a thing defined by a subset of all the true statements that could be made about it. This is not just *one* statement, for a thing's aspect has a complexity—as we have seen—exceeding by far what is captured by one single property of the things. It is, after all, an abbreviation of a thing, as we found in the previous chapter. In fact, in painting and historical representation aspects are deliberately singled out in representation by foregrounding some specific set of properties in one sweep. Presenteds are the product of such "foregroundings." They are always loose bundles of properties in the absence of unique identifiable things to which they can be tied (recall my argument in chapter 5 disconnecting presenteds from objects of reference). And there are no grounds on which for any subset of the bundle a priority can be granted over any other such subset, unless by some necessarily arbitrary ruling. Hence, even though

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it here its more radical, structural, antehistorical sense, *aletheia* means the opening up of the realm of the unconcealed, the very granting of the presence of the present. It is useful, as a graphematic device, to introduce here the hyphenated form, *a-letheia,* to signify this sense of the word, for one wants to stress the emergence of the field of presence itself from a radical intractable concealment. . . . In the 1930s Heidegger developed the view that prior to Plato *aletheia* meant unconcealedness, whereas in Plato himself a transition begins in which *aletheia* as unconcealedness comes to mean *orthotes* or correctness." See J. D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington 1993), 22–23. The main picture is that Heidegger moved from the first to the third sense of *aletheia* as the right rendering of the meaning of the Greek word *aletheia* while upholding at the same time the philosophical argument about truth being unconcealedness. It is the first sense of *aletheia* that I have in mind here, whereas the third sense agrees with propositional truth. I thank Hans Mooij for having drawn my attention to the passage quoted here.

12. Representation presents the world to us in terms of aspects of it that are sui generis partial. Aspects of things are only *parts* of things (even if they stand for the thing as a whole). Though in representation our view of the world is *unobstructed*—which is the good news—the bad news is that *partiality* is the price we have to pay for it. One might see this as representationalism's counterpart to the thesis of the theory ladenness of empirical fact.

13. The component *λήθεια* is derived from the Greek verb *λήθω,* meaning "being hidden" or "what escapes us."

14. "Die Übersetzung [of αλήθεια] durch das Wort 'Wahrheit' und erst recht die theoretische Begriffsbestimmungen dieses Ausdrucks verdecken den Sinn dessen, was die Griechen als vorphilosophisches Verständnis dem terminologischen Gebrauch von αλήθεια 'selbstverständlich zugrunde legten.'" Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit,* 219.

we may say that *all* material objects of a certain size have "backsides," it does not follow from this that generalizations over presenteds, such as backsides, should be possible[15]. And this implies, again, that these loose bundles of properties could never be divided up in a subset referring to some unique individual object and some other subset attributing certain properties to it. We can therefore never move from these loose bundles (presenteds) to statements such as "x is ϕ" that can propositionally be either true or false. All that we may legitimately expect from these "foregroundings" is that they can give us a *revelation* (αλήθεια) of a thing or object in terms of its presented, in the sense of revealing to us its Truth— rather than its truths, since, again, the aspect subsumes in itself a massive set of truths with a coherence determined by the representation keeping them all together within one unity. To get a grasp of the proportions of this set, think of the totality of all the true statements that one historical representation may contain. These truths are not actually *asserted* by the presented but rather *adumbrated* or *intimated.* The German language has the untranslatable word *Ahnen* for the kind of awareness we may have of the truth suggested by a representation's presented.

In sum, in agreement with Heidegger's notion of truth as αλήθεια, or *Unverborgenheit,* representational truth is a *revelation of reality.* Not language but reality itself ignites here the light of truth, although this self-revelation of reality can be achieved only through representation. To continue this light metaphor: truth in representation can be seen as a reflection of the light radiated on it by representations; and we construct representations for no other reason than to achieve this effect of a reflection by (past) reality. Representation will remind us of M. H. Abram's metaphor of the Romantic poet as a lamp shedding light on things hidden in the dark, which he illustrates with a passage in which Coleridge comments on Wordsworth's *The Prelude:*

> . . . of moments awful,
> Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,

15. It follows that no reliable general laws can be found in historical writing—either on the basis of regularities perceived to be present in the historical writings on one and the same historical phenomenon or on the basis of what one token of a certain type of historical phenomenon (e.g., revolutions, wars, nation states, and so on) should have in common with other such tokens. For both variants of generalization rely on the always wholly arbitrary division of these loose bundles of properties (viz. of *presenteds*) into one subset being allegedly more basic than some other subset, and which because of this arrogate to themselves the right to function as the nascent subject terms of statements about the world that can propositionally be true or false. Or, to summarize it all from a different perspective, generalization is a real possibility for *things* or *objects*, but not for *presenteds,* even though—or rather, precisely *because*—presenteds are *aspects* of things or objects.

When power streamed from thee. And thy soul received
The light reflected, as a light bestowed.[16]

There is one signal difference, however: in this conception of the Romantic poet light has its source in the pure given of the poet's genius, whereas the light of historical narrative truth is produced by carefully constructed and intensively discussed historical representations of the past. The myth of Romantic genius is replaced here by the rationality of historical debate. And though we may well be fascinated by how the historian continues the tradition of poetic genius, we have even more and better reasons for being fascinated by these reflections cast back to us by the past thanks to the light that is shed on the represented by the historian's representations—and quite rightly so, for here one must discern the "empiricist" dimension of historical writing. The exploration of (past) reality then allies itself with Romantic genius (not so surprising, then, that historicist historical writing came into being during Romanticism). And we must admire the writing of history and the historian for making this singular feat possible.

Indeed, whereas Heidegger's *αλήθεια* seems to move us beyond scientific and disciplinary rationality to the domain of Heideggerian obiter dicta and philosophical hocus-pocus, historical truth is firmly attached to the practice and rationality of historical discussion. Representational truth, the kind of truth embodied in a representation's presented, does not carry us to the domain of myth and of irresponsible and arbitrary speculation. There is nothing particularly mysterious or undecidable about, for example, the assertion that a person's back is an aspect that is less revealing of who that person is than the aspect that we call his face.[17] And so it is with history. For as everyone acquainted with the practice of history will know, historical discussion progresses to the satisfaction of both historians themselves and their audience, and the triumphs of contemporary historical writing are no less

16. Quoted in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), 60. No less illustrative is the quote from Yeats that Abrams chose as epigraph for his book: "[I]t must go further still: that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp." It is to be regretted that Rorty—the author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—never commented on the Romanticists' exchange of the metaphor of the mirror for that of the lamp. For a most profound and erudite exploration of all the ramifications of the metaphor of light as truth, see H. Blumenberg, "Light as Metaphor," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. D. M. Levin (Berkeley, 1993).

17. And that we are only too happy to upgrade from being an aspect to being a thing. There is, indeed, no greater obstacle to a satisfactory grasp of representation than the slovenliness inspired by our interaction with the objects surrounding us in daily life. This is where the philosopher of history will envy the philosopher of science.

impressive than those of the sciences. The philosophers of history therefore have no reason to doubt that historians achieve historical truth. On the contrary, historical representation presents philosophers with a fascinating new conception of truth and with a still largely unexplored variant of disciplinary rationality. And they should avoid projecting on historical writing conceptions of truth alien to it in order to explain whether and why truth is, or is not, attainable in the practice of historical writing. They should begin by accepting history as it is.

4. Truth without Correspondence

In 1967 Richard Rorty published his now-famous anthology *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method.* In his introduction Rorty defined the linguistic turn as "the view that philosophical problems are problems which can be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."[18] He had in mind here the revolution in the philosophy of language effected by Quine's theory of the underdetermination of theory by empirical fact expounded in section 1 of chapter 5. The basic insight here was, as we may recall, the recognition that any scientific theory can be reconciled with recalcitrant data by making suitable adjustments elsewhere in our assumptions about nature. The result is that in case of a conflict between the predictions of a theory and empirical evidence, the problem may be caused by any of these other assumptions no less than by the actual theory in question. So there is no comfortable one-to-one relationship between theory and empirical evidence as empiricists had always believed. The empiricist's confidence that a theory's truth has its ground in the correspondence between fact and theory was now exposed as an illusion. For a whole web of theories is potentially involved in the (dis-) confirmation of theory by empirical fact. This essentially holist conception of how theory relates to the data of empirical evidence came to be known as the Quine-Duhem thesis. And its main implication is the claim that theory or language has a certain autonomy or inertia with regard to empirical evidence or the world. This was bad news for the logical–positivist ideal of a re-

18. R. Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967), 3. In fact, there is an ambiguity here. For on the one hand almost all of analytical philosophy of language since the days of Frege could be described in this way—and then the linguistic turn would be identical with all of philosophy of language. But on the other hand, Rorty also had in mind a specific development within the philosophy of language itself, namely, its farewell to empiricist accounts of language assuming that language, truth, meaning, and reference should all have their ultimate basis in empirical data about what the world is like.

lationship between theory and reality containing two variables only, namely, empirical evidence and logic.

But it was very good news for the humanities, where the relationship between evidence and theory has always been notoriously insecure. Practitioners and theorists of the humanities suddenly came to feel that what had always given them an inferiority complex with regard to their colleagues in the sciences was part of the sciences as well. We need not be surprised, therefore, that the linguistic turn was most warmly welcomed in the humanities and that it seemed to rescue these disciplines from the neglect and contempt that had been their sad fate under the previous, logical-positivist dispensation.

However, when thus capitalizing on the linguistic turn, theorists of the humanities forgot that Quine had the sciences in mind and that it had certainly not been his intention to somehow rehabilitate the humanities, for which he felt only distaste and contempt. This may explain part of the inadequacies of the linguistic turn in the humanities. For Quine's attack on the dogmas of empiricism was, essentially, a claim about the relationship between empirical fact and scientific theory, hence about the relationship between knowledge of the world what it is knowledge of. It was a new departure in the research of our cognitivist claims to knowledge of the world. But the advocates of the linguistic turn in the humanities never really cared about truth and cognitivist claims. They saw in the linguistic turn only a celebration of the autonomy of language with regard to the world and a welcome exhortation to care no longer about evidence and truth at all. This attitude culminated in Derrida's notorious "Il n'y pas dehors texte." And nothing could have been further removed from Quine's original intentions. So, obviously, something went completely off the rails in the process of translating Quine's linguistic turn to the recent reflection on the humanities with all of its deconstructivist extravagances and its celebration of rhetoric.

Though I do not pretend to offer the last word about this, my hunch is that this misunderstanding resulted from a pulling together of two levels on which the issue of truth may arise. First, there is the object level of the truths about the world that are expressed in a text. Next, there is the metalevel of establishing either truthfully (or not, of course) *which* truth(s) the text actually expresses about the world. Assertions on this second level are far from trivially true or false in the case of complex texts such as those written by historians. This is, in fact, the level of the text's meaning in the sense that on that level the text's cognitive content is fixed. Here the decision is made about which sentences of a text define its meaning and which others are of little or no relevance. In science the first level will be the one that really counts or, rather, even be the only one present. In a scientific theory the distinction

between the important and the unimportant makes no sense. The theory says what it says, nothing more and nothing less.

But the truth claims of complex historical texts are always shrouded in the *clair-obscur* of the more and the less relevant. Texts, not theories, can be summarized in the proper sense of the word. And then the issue makes its presence felt of on what level truth claims must be located, about what are the text's relevant truth claims, hence, whether these truths must be located on the object- or on the metalevel. Questions of how the text should be understood, about what it really says—hence of meaning and interpretation—will then drive questions of truth on the object level into the background. As indeed is the case in historical writing where the truth of statements of past fact is ordinarily taken for granted. The cognitive emphasis will then be on the second, metalevel of truth.

Two things should be observed here. In the first place, the latter level was not present in Quine's own argument, as we would have expected because of his scientism.[19] This is why he subordinated issues of meaning to those of truth.[20] In the second place, the language we use for writing historical texts unfortunately lacks the means for warning us when we move from one level of truth to the other—which from the perspective of the philosophy of language is one of the most fatal defects of the natural languages we happen to use. Natural language never correctly and automatically registers such transitions. Historians therefore tend to forget about them, with the result that they are rarely if ever clearly announced in the text. The historical text always presents itself to us as a seamless whole, with the result that we no longer distinguish between the expression of truths about the past on the one hand and the expression of textual meaning on the other. This is why (1) in historical debates historians so often mistake disagreements about meaning for disagreements about facts[21] and (2) we tend to forget that there are these two levels in the historical text at all.

But we should formulate the going together of these two levels more accurately. It is not like mixing apples and oranges together in one bag where apples remain apples and oranges oranges. For if representational language is such a seamless whole, there truly is an interaction between the two levels

19. But it was not wholly absent, if we think of his notion of "semantic ascent." See W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (1960; repr., Cambridge, MA 1975), 271–276.

20. Ibid.,51–57. The same is true of Donald Davidson.

21. For example, many historians will say that Jonathan Israel is wrong when granting to Spinoza such a prominent role in the Enlightenment. And then a discussion about the meaning of the term "Enlightenment" will be misconstrued as a discussion about truth or falsity.

that results in something different from both and possesses emergent properties of its own—just as the union of hydrogen and oxygen results in water, which has its own emergent properties that are in several respects different from those of hydrogen and oxygen.

So it is with truth and meaning in the historical text. From the perspective of the text the otherwise perfectly reasonable view that knowledge of meaning is conditional for establishing truth is of no help. Nor is the equally reasonable view that truth is conditional for the text's meaning. Both views presuppose that the fixation of meaning and that of truth are wholly independent procedures. There is, on the one hand, the "horizontal axis" of language, meaning, and interpretation and, on the other, wholly distinct from it, the "vertical axis" of truth and the relationship between language and the world. In the humanities, however, language is "a way of worldmaking," to use Nelson Goodman's happy phrase; and then interpretation involves not only the fixation of *meaning* but also of a *world*. And then meaning will determine truth, in the sense of entailing its own truth conditions; it will then be well-nigh impossible to disentangle the vertical and the horizontal axis from each other. In this sense Derrida's statement quoted above is, after all, less outrageous than it may seem at first. For he was right in suggesting that textual meaning defines a world in a way that the prototypical true statement never could.

So this is what the linguistic turn basically looks like for (historical) representation. Language does have here an autonomy with regard to the world that empiricism could not possibly allow for. However, this is *not* because of an underdetermination of theory by fact (as was the case with Quine) but because language if used representationally privileges meaning over truth so that truth follows meaning instead of the reverse. In historical representation truth is born from meaning. Nevertheless, in this way representation goes against traditional empiricist intuitions about correspondence between language and fact no less than does Quine's claim that "language hangs loosely on the world." This may explain why it was so easily forgotten that the linguistic turn initiated by Quine with his attack on the dogmas of empiricism had little in common with the linguistic turn in the humanities.

Nevertheless, the enemies of the linguistic turn in the humanities were vaguely aware of its antiempiricist tendencies, and this is what made both historians and some philosophers of history so deeply distrustful of it. Their fear was that the embrace of the linguistic turn would rob historical writing of its credentials as a true human science devoted to the pursuit of historical truth. But, as we have seen, there is no reason for such fears. Indeed, historical representation does not give us truth as correspondence

but the revelation of a truth that is intrinsic in the past itself. We have no real reason for being disappointed or dissatisfied with this kind of truth. Truth as revelation situates truth in the past itself—more specifically, in an *aspect* of the past that is highlighted by a representation. Not only is this how the bridge is built between language and the world in agreement with all time-honored empiricist intuitions—preventing historical representation from getting lost in idle speculation—but it also implies that it is the historian's assignment to discover what aspects of the past will be more conducive than others to our understanding of the past. And this assignment is as much in agreement with all our intuitions about historical writing as it is workable.

Finally, how historians actually decide about such issues in individual cases is a matter of historical practice. Philosophers of history should avoid pronouncing on that. It is their task only to present an elucidation of what is at stake in historical discussion from a philosophical point of view (which will, in its turn, be of no professional interest to historians). The philosopher of history should not meddle with historical methodology—for that is a different game.

5. Truth in History and the Novel

Much of the distrust of the linguistic turn among historians and philosophers of history arose from the simple fact that the linguistic turn made its entry into the humanities via literary theory and not via the relevant ideas of philosophers such as Quine or Rorty, even though their names were sometimes mentioned by the advocates of the linguistic turn in the philosophy of history. The opponents of the linguistic turn in the philosophy of history were quick to exploit this fact and did not hesitate to discredit the linguistic turn by pointing out that the historian's concern with truth is not shared by the novelist. Novels are fiction, whereas history aims to tell us the truth about the past. So we cannot expect anything valuable from literary theory for an elucidation of historical writing.

However, now that we have proposed a definition of representational truth, we can reverse the kind of argument followed by the adherents of the linguistic turn in the reflection on historical writing. It is commonly asked in what way the novel and literary theory might shed some interesting new light on historical writing. I now propose to discuss how historical writing may deepen our insight into the novel and, more specifically, whether our investigations into the nature of representational truth will permit us to speak

of the truth of the novel.[22] Is there a cognitive dimension to the novel that philosophy of history will allow us to get hold of?

Approaching the novel with the notion of historical truth (as sketched in the previous sections) in mind will enable us to remove one time-honored obstacle to a fruitful comparison of history and the novel. I have in mind here the argument formulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics,* which admittedly has a good deal of a priori plausibility: "The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. . . . The true difference is that one relates what happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."[23] So the intuition here is that the historian's statements are always linked to particular facts, which took place at particular times and places, whereas the novel is free from this disabling restriction. The hierarchy that Aristotle claims to exist between poetry and history loses much of its appeal if we realize that the novelist relates facts no less than does the historian—albeit imaginary facts. But from a philosophical point of view the distinction between real and imaginary facts is immaterial here—and insofar as philosophers, always striving for truth, have to choose between real and imaginary facts, they will undoubtedly prefer history to fiction. Thus there is something profoundly counterintuitive in the elevation of poetry above history by a philosopher as much devoted to truth as Aristotle. But apart from that, we must agree with Aristotle, whether we like it or not, when he says that the historical text is true to fact while this will ordinarily not be the case with poetry. And admittedly, this seems a very plausible way for distinguishing between history and the novel.

But against the background of the results of this chapter, the undeniable truth of Aristotle's observation loses much if not all of its relevance. For we might now point out that in *most* cases (there is such an enormous variety of novels that it is impossible to generalize about them) novels, just like historical writing, single out one or more aspects of our social and private world and that we can meaningfully discuss their representational truth. The notion of

22. Looking at the novel in this way is in agreement with my argument in chapter 3, where it was shown that representation precedes interpretation. We do insufficient justice to the novel when we interpret it only while refraining from asking ourselves what it represents. And the fact that what it represents will often be an imaginary reality does not diminish in any way the urgency of this question. For that has no implications at all for the representationalism of the novel. We read the novel as if it were true, and the failure to do so will make nonsense of the literary text.

23. Aristotle, *Poetics* IX, 2–4.

the aspect or the presented upsets Aristotle's argument as follows. In the first place, whereas Aristotle uses truth to distinguish between history and the novel because the former contains true sentences while the latter does not, we can say—with the notion of the aspect at the back of our mind—that from the perspective of truth there is common ground rather than difference between the two of them. Both give us aspects of the world that can be said to be representationally true or not; and that this can be said about both of them is more important than the fact the historian's sentences are true whereas those of the novelist are not. And second, Aristotle was right in his intuition that there is a kind of truth that is deeper and more profound than mere propositional truth, but he was wrong in attributing it to poetry or the novel, for it has its ultimate source and legitimation in the notion of the aspect, which we primarily owe to history and to the reflection on the nature of historical writing. If you wish to investigate representational (and aesthetic) truth, there is no better way to begin than by investigating historical representation.

In sum, representational truth has its preferred habitat in the writing of history if only because historians have developed an impressive array of instruments for determining and establishing representational truth. And from there, from history, it may later on cross over to the novel. While so many contemporary theorists of history have used the novel in order to come to a better understanding of history, we should opt for the opposite route if trying to make sense of the truth of the novel.

Clearly, this does not in the least imply that we should now start to question what historical theorists have said about historical writing from the perspective of the novel and of literary theory. We cannot doubt that their effort has profoundly contributed to our understanding of the historical text, and it is to be hoped that they will continue their research as assiduously as they have in the past. But this should not make us forget that when we ask for the truth of the novel, literary theorists will have to listen carefully to what philosophers of history have to say about historical representational truth. It cannot be doubted that this will be as illuminating for literary theorists as literary theory has been for historical theorists in the last few decades.

More specifically, in chapter 3 we discussed the hierarchy obtaining between representation and interpretation. Not being sufficiently aware of what is shared by history and the novel, literary theorists tended to rely too heavily on interpretation; they then forgot about the representational anchors of the text and started to do things with texts that said more about the interpreters themselves and literary theory than about the text. Thus a clearer

awareness of the historical text and the philosophical problems occasioned by it might do a lot of good in literary theory.

Thus far my comparison of history and the novel has remained on the level of abstraction. I therefore conclude this section by citing some actual historical facts in favor of my claim that the novel's truth has its origins in historical truth. When we go on to compare history and the novel, it will prove helpful if we realize that there exists such a thing as the historical novel, combining properties of both the novel and historical writing. The historical novel clearly is the *trait d'union* between the two. It's a novel but can and will also be read for the information it gives about the past. Comparing the historical novel with historical writing, one might say that the difference between the two is that the latter tells us the truth about the past whereas the former, being a novel, does not. Obviously, this would reduce us again to the Aristotelian argument we discussed above with the implication that the observation is correct but not particularly relevant.

But instead of leaving it there, I'd like to say now a few things about the historical novel and the writing of history from the perspective of the actual facts that are stated in both of them. *Pace* Aristotle, one could imagine a historical novel about a part of the past that is so well documented that evidence can be given for each of the novel's statements. Next, there may be errors in a historical narrative, and even if their number is quite considerable, no one will even begin to think that the work might be a historical novel. It will simply be condemned as bad history.

So contrary to Aristotle's intuitions, the difference between the historical text and the historical novel is formal rather than material and can be found in how historical truths are presented in each of them. In a historical narrative, historical truth is discovered, presented, and defended against potential criticism, especially on the level of factual truth. Here historians may go to great length to explain their choice and interpretation of source material and to justify the causal claims made in their narrative. Indeed, none of this has its counterpart in the text of the historical novel—though it may well be that the author of a historical novel did a lot of historical research before writing it. Next, there is the level in which the historian presents his readers with a representation of the past, inviting them to focus on certain aspects of the past rather than on others. And obviously this dimension is present in the historical novel as well: it functions at least partly as a history book by intimating what the past in which it is located must have been like and what aspects of the past we should focus on.

However, whereas a historical narrative aims at the construction of some representation of part of the past, the historical novel *applies* the historical

knowledge conveyed by a representation of the past to the historical novel's main characters.[24] This is also why, as Georg Lukacs has insisted, a historical novel's main characters typically are flat, uninteresting, and of no historical significance themselves.[25] The past is shown there as it presents itself to the countless nameless persons undergoing it who never determine its course.[26] Writing a historical novel around a well-known and important historical personality is asking for trouble. For then the application of a historical representation's represented aspects of the past to a person is likely to be complicated by facts about that person that the historical novelist will have to respect. It can be done, but it's awkward, and it would be better to avoid these complications. It's a bit like pasting wallpaper: the rougher and more uneven the wall is, the more difficult the task and the worse the result is likely to be. So it is part of the logic of the historical novel that it is written from a perspective creating as little obstacles as possible for the application of historical knowledge to the actual historical realities in which the people in the past themselves lived.

Put differently, we had best see the historical novel as an *application* to the past of the knowledge of the past acquired by historical research. So the difference between the historical text and the historical novel will be much like

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24. In historical writing the past is shown from the perspective of the representation proposed by the historian; in the historical novel the past is shown from the perspective of the personalities presented in the novel. As Käte Hamburger puts it, in the historical novel the "Ich-Origo" of the historical text's author and reader is replaced by the "Ich-Origo" of the novel's personalities. See J. J. A. Mooij, "Roman en Werkelijkheid," in *Tèkst en Lezer* (Amsterdam, 1979), 69.

25. "Der Held der Schottschen Romane ist stets ein mehr oder weniger mittelmässiger, durchschnittlicher Englischer Gentleman. Dieser besitzt in allgemeinen eine gewisse, nie überragende praktische Klugheit, eine gewisse moralische Festigkeit und Anständigkeit, die aber niemals zu einer menschlich hinreissenden Leidenschaft erwächst, nie begeisterte Hingabe an eine grosse Sache ist." G. L. Lukacs, *Der historische Roman* (Neuwied, 1965), 39, 40. See also 42, 43.

26. Surely this was one of the most revolutionary achievements of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels. In the first place, it meant the entry of ordinary men in the representation of the past. And one might well discern here an anticipation of what would become known in our own time as *Alltagsgeschichte,* the history of everyday life. Next, Scott's procedure unintentionally effected a mixture of two quite different story lines: that of the course of history itself and that of the lives of his very inconspicuous heroes. This is where Scott's historical novel comes close to the mixture of the high and the low style that Auerbach had argued to be the defining characteristic of Western literary realism in his *Mimesis.* And it comes no less close to Roland Barthes's *effet du réel* that is, the reality effect of the naturalist novel that convinces us that things must have been exactly as the novelist presents them to us. This also is what Balzac transposed from the historical to the realist novel: "Ce sera la gloire éternelle de Balzac d"avoir fait comprende que les choses les plus mesquines, les spectacles les plus communs et les plus vulgaires portent en eux leur intérêt, et que la vie familière avec le pèle-mèle des ses menus incidents quotidiens et dans son cadre habituel, peut offrir encore de la poésie." See L. Maigron, *Le roman historique à l"époque Romantique. Essai sur l'influence de Walter Scott* (Paris, 1898), 428.

that between a textbook on mechanics and the civil engineer's design for a bridge in which the textbook's knowledge is applied in the construction of that specific bridge. The historical novel gives us applied knowledge of the past.[27]

Nevertheless, this does not alter the cognitivism shared by historical writing and the historical novel: though more openly and directly in historical writing and though more covertly and implicitly in the historical novel, both claim to say or show the past in terms of its aspects and both can be either criticized for their failure in doing so, or be praised for their success in giving us access to a past world that has become alien to us[28].

Finally, I move from the historical novel to the realist novel and will be content with repeating what Louis Maigron said about this more than a century ago. For Maigron, the realist, or naturalist, novel was born with Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*—a series of both written and projected novels with which Balzac aimed at giving a literary image of his own time. Maigron lengthily explains Balzac's admiration for Sir Walter Scott and then goes on to say,

> [T]he novel is for him (i.e., Balzac) nothing but the novel of Walter Scott robbed of its archaic substance and filled with modern material. The "Waverley Novels" evoked societies of the past, and we will not

27. See my *Narrative Logic* (The Hague,1983), chap. 1. There is one more asymmetry between historical writing and the historical novel, which one could define as the difference between the explicitness of telling and the deliberate multi-interpretability of 'showing." The historian will not show the past but just tell what, in his view, it was like; he will be as explicit as possible about all this and never leave his readers in doubt about his authorial intentions. The historical novelist—as a novelist—will know that this does not work in the novel and that his story must be as open and multi-interpretable as reality itself is. For this is what we expect of novels: they give us an epiphany of reality itself. So he must show his readers what the world is like—or the world of the past, as the case may be—but he leaves it to them to find out about that for themselves. I emphasize, though, that this shift from the author's to the reader's responsibilities has its analogue in historical writing on the level of historical representation as well. The nature of historical representation is basically intertextualist and requires its contextualization within an indefinite set of cognate representations. In sum, historical representations will typically escape authorial intention and need interpretation no less than our social and political world itself. This is where the historical discipline suddenly partakes in the logic of the novel.

28. When discussing the nineteenth-century Italian historical novelist Manzoni (1785–1873) Lukacs writes, "[E]r (Manzoni) meint . . . dass es keinen prinzipiellen Widerspruch zwischen historischer Treue und dichterisch-individualisierender dramatischer Verlebendigung gibt and geben kann. Die historische Überlieferung teile uns die Tatsachen, die allgemeinen Entwicklungsrichtungen mit. Daran etwas zu ändern habe der dramatische Dichter kein Recht. Er habe aber auch keine Ursache, denn wenn er seine Gestalten wirklich individualisiert und gestalten wolle, so finde er dazu in den geschichtlichen Tatsachen die wichtigsten Anhaltspunkte und Hilfsmittel:je tiefer er in die Geschichte eindringe, desto mehr." Lukacs, *Der historische Roman,* 133.

> need to repeat here with what accuracy and power they succeeded in doing so; with even more truth and even more striking contours *La Comédie Humaine* resuscitates a whole modern epoch with all of the prodigious multiplicity of its details and with all of the endless variety of its contrasts; for the first time the novel will have achieved its aim and will be the most exact and perfect copy "social images."[29]

Hence what Balzac achieved and what was further perfected in the naturalist and realist novel from Balzac via Flaubert to Maupassant and the brothers Goncourt and Zola was basically the application of the techniques of the historical novel to modern life. The parameters of the past in the historical novel were exchanged for those of the present—and that gave us the realist or naturalist novel.[30] Hence the kind of novel about which Zola wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin:* "[T]ant que j'ai écrit *Thérèse Raquin,* j'ai oublié le monde, je me suis perdu dans *la copie exacte et minutieuse de la vie,* me donnant entier à l'analyse du mécanisme humain [emphasis added]." And is this not what every historian hopes to achieve as well? The scope of my argument is restricted to the realist novel, so I shall be the first to concede that it has no bearing on all the variants of the novel that were developed in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that there is a cognitivist bridge between the novel and historical writing that we should make use of more frequently in the future when discussing historical writing and the novel.

6. Conclusion

I have made two main claims in this chapter. The first is that we are justified in speaking of historical truth. Not only are a historical text's individual sentences typically true of the past—which is an uninteresting and trivial observation from a philosophical point of view—but the same can be said

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29. "[L]e roman n'est chez lui (i.e. Balzac), en effet, que le roman de Walter Scott vidé de sa substance archaïque et rempli de matière moderne. Les "Waverley Novels" évoquaient des sociétés disparues, et quelle était la fidélité de cette évocation et sa puissance, nous n'avons pas à le redire; avec plus de vérité et un relief plus saisissant, la *Comédie Humaine* fera revivre toute une époque moderne dans la prodigieuse multiplicité de ses détails et de l'innombrable variété des ses contrastes; et pour la première fois le roman aura complètement atteint son objet et sera la plus exacte et la plus parfaite des 'images sociales.'" See L. Maigron; *op. cit.;* 429.

30. Having expounded the "realism" of the historical novel, Maigron goes on to say: "mais ne reconnaît-on pas là l'ordinaire méthode de Balzac et de Flaubert? N'ont-ils pas dû entrer "dans la peau" des petits employés, des bourgeois, des médecins, et des pharmaciens de campagne, pour écrire certains livres de la *Comédie Humaine* ou *Madame Bovary?*" See Maigron, *Le roman historique,* 420.

of that text *as a whole,* though in that case we are dealing with a different kind of truth.

A historical representation may reveal to us a truth that is inherent in the world itself (namely, as embodied in the representation's presented) and that we can become aware of only through the representation in question. The rationality of historical debate—as amply exemplified in the history of historical writing—makes abundantly clear that this kind of (historical) truth is anything but irrational or arbitrary. Truth as revelation must therefore be added to the inventory of instruments we rely upon for the cognitivist conquest of the world in which we live.

At the same time, representation is a term from aesthetics and has its paradigmatic examples in the arts, such as painting or sculpture. This observation can be interpreted in three ways. It may be inferred from representation's position as a *trait d'union* between history and aesthetics that history belongs to the domain of the arts and should hence abandon its cognitive claims. That is a first option. Next, it may be argued that if there exists such a thing as historical representational truth, we should not eschew the notion of aesthetic truth for both history and the novel. This gives us a second option. One might conclude that we should undo what Gadamer had described as "the aesthetic consciousness" (*das ästhetische Bewusstsein*). He had in mind here the revolution effected by Kant (and especially Schiller) resulting in a radical and irreversible separation of the arts and sciences.[31] Following Gadamer would mean a return to a stage prior to Kant and Schiller where aesthetic and scientific truth are not considered necessarily incompatible. That would be a third option. I would myself hesitate between option two and option three—but a discussion of this issue is of no relevance here.

My second main claim in this chapter is that meaning determines truth and not the other way around. This makes a discussion of historical (representational) meaning all the more urgent. We shall address this issue in the next chapter.

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31. H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. J. Weinsheimer and. G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York, 2003), 39.

CHAPTER 7

Meaning

1. Introduction

Truth, reference, and meaning have traditionally been the three central notions in philosophical semantics. In the preceding two chapters we dealt with the question of the role to be assigned to reference and truth in (historical) representation. We found that representations cannot be said to refer to the world in the way proper names and sentences do, though they can be characterized as self-referential. Similarly, the notion of truth can meaningfully be used in the context of representation, not in the sense of propositional truth but in the quasi-Heideggerian sense of truth as a revelation of a past reality. So that raises, finally, the question of meaning and representation—hence how to conceive representational meaning.

The word "meaning" can have many different meanings and be used in quite different contexts. Think of the following phrases: "the meaning of the word 'calaboose' is 'prison'"; "the meaning of *gavagai* is 'rabbit'; "what is the meaning of sentence S?"; "what is the meaning of text T?"; "what is the meaning of life?," "a hazy sky means rain"; "he meant to destroy his rival"; "when I say this, I mean you"; "what did this event mean to you?"; "do you really mean this?"; and so on. An exhaustive discussion of representational meaning would require us to make an inventory of all these different uses of the word "meaning" and investigate whether they might shed some light

on how to understand representational meaning. Obviously most of these investigations are destined to remain wholly pointless in the present context. I shall therefore not follow that strategy here; instead, I will take as my point of departure what theorists have said on textual (or representational) meaning and discuss whether their pronouncements may contribute to our understanding of the meaning of (historical) representation.

2. Representational and Fregean Meaning

At first blush, it seems to make no sense to speak of representational meaning. When we think of meaning, we primarily associate it with synonymy: when two terms are synonymous, they have the same meaning. We hear or read the word "calaboose," which is unknown to us, and then look in the dictionary and find that it is American slang for "prison." In most cases (of course not in statements about the word "calaboose" itself) we can exchange the former for the latter; and this is why we can say that the meaning of the word "calaboose" is "prison." But this only shifts the problem to another level; for we may now ask what this "synonymy," in terms of which meaning was defined, actually is. Perhaps it will then be said that two words are synonymous if they can be exchanged for each other *salva veritate.* And then the rejoinder will probably be that this is a criterion enabling us to us *establish* synonymy, but it still leaves us in the dark when we are looking for a *definition* of synonymy.

But instead of continuing this somewhat depressing dialogue, we had better point out right away that all of this has no analogue in historical representation. Suppose there exists such a thing as the meaning of a historical representation and that we wish to be informed about the meaning of historical representation R and hence about what set of signs would have the same meaning as R. Obviously there are no semantic rules or conventions defining what set of signs, other than R itself, has the same meaning as R. There are no dictionaries we can consult for representational meaning that would allow us to exchange one representation for another that allegedly has the same meaning. So sameness of meaning and synonymy are utterly hopeless if we are trying to define representational meaning.

It might be pointed out now that (historical) texts can be summarized and that such summaries do give us their meaning. But this is of no use either. For a text's summary has a meaning, again, of its own and therefore raises exactly the same problems in its own turn about what is a text's meaning as was already the case with the original text itself. Not only is this approach the first step in a *regressus ad infinitum,* but it could never provide us with

an answer to our question anyway. For obviously, when asking for the text's meaning, we ask how to make the leap from texts to meanings, and since summaries are texts themselves, they never actually make this leap.

Another strategy takes its cue from the fact that historical texts typically consist of true statements about states of affairs in the past. And let's assume for the sake of argument (1) that the historical text's meaning is in these sentences and (2) that true sentences can be said to have a meaning. It would follow that the text's meaning is the sum of the meanings of all its individual true statements. But this is clearly unsatisfactory. For suppose that we were to write down all the text's individual true statements on individual pieces of paper, would throw them all in a large bag, then pull them out again in an arbitrary order and write down what is written on each of them in that new order. This procedure would surely most seriously affect the text's meaning (assuming it has one). Hence, if the historical text has a meaning, the way its statements are ordered must be part of that meaning as well. So the meaning of a historical text would then be determined by the meanings both of all its individual statements *and* of the order in which they have been arranged in the text. But putting these two things together would get us back to the original historical text all over again: a text is a set of statements arranged within a certain order. Obviously we have been moving around in a circle here, saying merely that the meaning of a historical text is identical with the meaning of *that* historical text. Which is trivially true—again, on the assumption that texts have meanings. If texts have meanings, this is true; if they don't, it's nonsense. So this does not look very promising for the notion of textual meaning. Let us therefore try a wholly different approach and ask ourselves how we got involved with this notion of meaning at all.

We all know what required Frege to add meaning to truth and reference in his technical toolbox. Compare the following two statements: (1) "Hesperus is Hesperus" and (2) Hesperus is Phosphorus." If Mill and Russell are right in their claim that the only logical function of proper names is to refer to some object in reality, there should be no difference between (1) and (2), since the proper names Hesperus and Phosphorus both refer to one and the same object, namely, the planet Venus. So in that case (1) and (2) are both a logical truth. This militates against our intuition that the meanings of the two statements are different. Indeed, (1) expresses a logical truth, but (2) states an empirical truth of some (minor) astronomical interest.

In order to account for the difference between (1) and (2), Frege introduced the notion of meaning. He then went on to say that proper names such as Hesperus and Phosphorus do have a meaning or sense (i.e., "the star

we see in the evening/morning sky") and, next, that this accounts for the difference between (1) and 2). If this is going to be more than an explanation of *obscurum per obscurius,* he was now obliged to offer a satisfactory definition or clarification of meaning or sense. Thus, as Jeff Speaks points out,

> [T]he principal challenge for Fregeanism is the challenge of giving a non-metaphorical explanation of the nature of sense. This is a problem for the Fregean in a way that it is not for the possible worlds semanticists or the Russellian since the Fregean, unlike these two, introduces a new class of entities to serve as meanings or expressions rather than merely appropriating an already recognized sort of entity—like a function, or an object, property, or relation—to serve this purpose.[1]

From Frege, down to Quine and Davidson and beyond, the strategy for dealing with this has been to somehow define meaning in terms of propositional truth and reference. As M. Dummett, commenting on Frege, puts it, "To the sense of a word or expression belong only those features of its meaning which are relevant to the truth-value of some sentence in which it may occur: differences in meaning which are not so relevant are relegated to the tone of the word or expression."[2]

For example, the meaning of a proper name is some set of statements uniquely true of the object to which the proper name refers. So meaning is defined here in terms of truth (whereas I shall in this chapter derive truth and reference from meaning—while leaving meaning an undefined primitive term). This strategy has had many variants. But none of them offers a hopeful prospect for the definition of textual (historical) meaning because we have found in the preceding chapters that the historical text leaves no room for propositional truth and reference. Even worse, Frege postulated the notion of meaning in order to deal with a paradox occasioned by the notions of reference and propositional truth. And if these notions (understood in the traditional way) cannot be applied to historical representation, they could not possibly give rise there to the same kind of paradox that worried Frege. This may make us wonder whether we really are in need of such a thing as textual (historical) meaning at all. Perhaps we'd best try to get along with just reference and truth, as defined in the preceding chapters, and simply forget about such a mysterious hypothesis as representational meaning.

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1. See the entry by J. Speaks, "Theories of Meaning," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/entries/meaning/.

2. M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London, 1981), 84–85.

3. Intentional Meaning

But before embracing this defeatist conclusion we should turn to existing attempts to make sense of the notion of textual meaning. It is often argued that texts do have a meaning and that the discovery of their meaning is in certain areas of historical research the historian's primary task. This is especially so in the history of ideas (or intellectual history), where books like Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Rousseau's *Contrat Social* are investigated from a historical perspective. So let us start with the question whether the variant of textual meaning apparently at stake here may help us understand representational (historical) meaning.

We begin with a remark on the history of ideas. Though there undoubtedly is a good deal of overlap, the history of ideas must be distinguished from the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is, basically, the history of a discipline and therefore focuses almost exclusively on philosophical argument, while the meaning of what is asserted in a philosophical text is more or less taken for granted. In the history of ideas the situation is rather the reverse. Certainly, the historian of ideas cannot afford to disregard philosophical argument itself (nor can historical context be wholly ignored in the history of philosophy); nevertheless he will preferably focus on the question of what some philosopher may have meant in his writings or what meaning we should attribute to a term used by him. Since the historian of ideas is essentially a historian, we can expect him to contextualize historically the philosopher's writings and the terms that are used in it. Put differently, the historian of ideas will typically be interested in the interaction between philosophy and the historical *Umwelt* of which it is part.

This may explain, by the way, why the history of political thought is so very prominent in the history of ideas. Obviously, political philosophy is the philosophical subdiscipline directly affecting historical reality itself. Political philosophy gives rise to much more interaction with historical reality than, say, epistemology. No civil war has ever been fought in the name of an epistemological principle, whereas it has been on behalf of political principles such as democracy or popular sovereignty. This, then, is why the history of political thought is the obvious subject matter for the historian of ideas. And if the historian of ideas addresses that aspect or part of history, he is likely to ask himself questions such as these: What did Hobbes and Rousseau themselves *mean* by their texts? What was the *meaning* of this text by Hobbes of Rousseau in the history of political thought? What meaning do their writings still have for us? It need not surprise us, then, that the historian of ideas

has a professional interest in the issue of what is to be seen as the meaning of a text—hence the question that concerns us here.

The modern debate of this issue began with an influential article by Quentin Skinner of some forty years ago.[3] In this essay Skinner rejected both a contextualist and a textualist analysis of textual meaning. In the contextualist conception, the historical context within which a text came into being determines its meaning—think of Marx, Foucault, or Pocock. The result is that the author of the text has no control over its meaning—which is clearly nonsensical. The other extreme is textualism, where only the text itself can give us access to its meaning; all contextual factors, including the author's intentions, are or should be left out of consideration. This is no less at odds with what we all accept as too obvious to be stated, namely that we must take into account the historical circumstances under which a text came into being. It would be ridiculous to discuss the meaning of Sieyès's *Qu'est-ce que c'est le Tiers État?* without bearing in mind that it was written in the spring of 1789. In order to overcome the shortcomings of the contextualist and textualist approach Skinner recommends that the historian of ideas focus on an utterance's illocutionary force: "It has been classically demonstrated, however, by J. L. Austin, that the understanding of statements presupposes a grasp, not merely of the meaning of a given utterance, but also of what Austin labelled its illocutionary force."[4]

Not only does the statement—or text—convey a certain meaning, but its author also wishes to do something with it or to perform a certain action with it. For example, it was Sieyès's intention to intervene with his treatise in the debates about what should be the task and function of the Assembly of the États Généraux that had been convened by Louis XVI. Sieyès truly wanted to *do* something with his treatise. In agreement with this, Skinner requires us to discern three levels of meaning in a text: what do the words mean, or what do specific words or sentences mean in this work? (meaning_1); what does this work mean to me? (meaning_2); and what does the writer mean by what he says in this work? (meaning_3) while insisting that meaning_3 is the proper object of study in the history of ideas.[5] Clearly, for Skinner the meaning of the text is primarily *intentional* meaning requiring the historian of ideas to find out what had been the author's intention when writing a text. As Skinner summarizes his claim, "[T]o know what a writer

3. Q. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Oxford, 1988), 29–68.

4. Ibid., 61.

5. Q. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and Interpretation," in Tully, *Meaning and Context*, 70.

meant by a particular work is to know what his primary intentions were when writing it."[6]

Mark Bevir also discerns three variants of meaning that are of relevance for the historian of ideas. In the first place there is "linguistic meaning," which one can find out about by consulting a dictionary for the meaning of a word. Next there is the "semantic meaning" of a sentence, which is defined by the truth-conditions assigning to it its truth value.[7] Bevir does not discuss the issue of whether linguistic meaning can be reduced to semantic meaning and, if not, why this should be so. But since this issue is of no relevance within the context of my argument here, I shall leave this matter aside. Nor will I address the question of the dissimilarities between Skinner's meaning_1 and meaning_2 on the one hand and Bevir's linguistic and semantic meaning on the other. Instead I shall now concentrate on Bevir's third variant of meaning, hermeneutic meaning. He defines hermeneutic meaning as follows: "[I]n hermeneutics, we examine the ideas conveyed by a particular utterance: we ask 'What did an author mean when he said such and such.' . . . Furthermore, when we ask what someone meant by a particular utterance on a particular occasion, we ask about their intentions in making it."[8]

It is clear that this does not differ substantially from Skinner's meaning_3. Both Skinner and Bevir define a text's meaning in terms of the intentions of its author when writing it. There is a difference, though. In the course of his argument Bevir distinguishes between strong and weak intentionalism. Strong intentionalists "argue that the meaning of an utterance to its author exhausts its historical meaning"—so Skinner could probably be described as a strong intentionalist. Bevir, however, prefers weak intentionalism, allowing that "because utterances can have non-authorial meanings, they can come to possess public meanings of greater historical import than the meaning they have for their authors."[9] I entirely agree with this but wish to emphasize that this concession seems to invite the end of intentionalism. If we agree with Bevir's weak intentionalism and are willing to consider the "public" meanings given to a text by later scholars studying the text as *also* conveying a text's meaning, nothing can stop us anymore from embracing, for example,

6. Ibid., 76.
7. M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, 1999), 35.
8. Ibid., 37, 38, 51.
9. Ibid., 72.

Gadamer's "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), Derrida's deconstructivism, or Stanley Fish's interpretationalist variant of Paul Feyerabend's "anything goes." The intentionalist's case has then been given away.[10]

Bevir himself is aware of the danger. For, as he now insists, his weak intentionalism leaves room only for interpretations of a text written with the sincere intention of grasping the intentions of the text's author. But this will make things worse rather than better. Because the historian of ideas ordinarily writes a text about texts written by the past authors investigated by him, the original problem of the intentional meaning of these texts will now shift to that of the intentional meaning of the text written by the historian of ideas. Did this historian intend to get to the intentions of the past author discussed by him or not? The discussion of this issue will only add a new level to the two levels of intentions we had already. And so on. The implication seems to be that strong intentionalism (avoiding involvement in the historian's intentions, which trigger a *regressus ad infinitum*) is, after all, to be preferred to Bevir's weak intentionalism.

Again, it is not my purpose here to pronounce on the plausibility of the different variants of intentionalism. My aim is merely to investigate whether it provides us with a promising model for representational (historical) meaning. For several reasons this must seem doubtful. In the first place, when we ask for representational meaning, we are looking for what meaning a historical text—as such—may have and not what meanings can be conveyed or constructed by means of it. Think of a word and the letters used for expressing it: the word has a meaning and the letters do not, even though only the letters can give us access to the word and its meaning. And so it is here. Within Skinner's and Bevir's picture of the text and its meaning, texts are used for expressing intentional meaning in much the same way that we need letters to construct words. Consequently, within the intentionalist picture of the text, texts have no meanings themselves.[11] Bevir even explicitly

10. At this stage it is to be regretted that theorists such as Bevir pay no attention to what has been said on interpretation by literary theorists. Booth's notion of the "implied author" and similar proposals made by Wolfgang Iser might have been quite helpful here.

11. Part of the problem is that Bevir does not take into account the fact that apart from being a potential object of interpretation (and then interpreters must be around), texts also represent, as explained in chapter 3 (and this is what texts, paintings, and representations do even when the whole of mankind has become extinct and the "last interpreter" is dead). The explanation is, undoubtedly, that the representational dimension is far weaker in texts written by political philosophers than in historical texts. But insofar as the political treatise always is a comment on politics, it certainly is present there as well.

embraces this rather unpalatable conclusion himself: "[B]ecause historical meanings are always meanings for individuals, we cannot ascribe historical meanings to texts."[12]

But there are more problems. According to intentionalism, the text is a means of realizing a certain intention, which is why having knowledge of the intention may explain the text and/or give us its meaning. This raises two difficulties. In the first place we should ask ourselves how we can get hold of a past author's intentions. Probably by investigating his text? But how can we then assert that the intention explains the text? If the text gives us its authorial intention, we're obviously moving around in a circle when arguing, next, that intentions explain texts.

Second, there is something profoundly counterintuitive about the Collingwoodian picture of a past author writing a text in order to achieve a certain intention. How would this work? How does the author's mind succeed in matching an intention on the one hand and such an utterly complex and unwieldy thing as a text of a few hundred pages on the other? Why did he decide on *this* text and not some shorter or longer or slightly different one? What made him believe that precisely *this* text would achieve its intended goal? More specifically, does authorial intention reach down to the minutest details of a text as found on the level of the text's individual sentences and parts thereof? Are intentions so all-pervasive that they would also determine such details? And if not, where is the demarcation line between mere detail and what is not a detail? Can we achieve agreement on what is to be considered mere detail and what is not? And, again, how to account then for these details? Or should we rather see them as mere irrelevant semantic static until a later historian discovers some deep meaning in the static? Moreover, this distinction between the more and the less relevant can also be made for the text we get when we have left out the irrelevancies of the original one. And so we could go on in this way until only one sentence is left of the original text.

Indeed, if we have the intention of increasing the temperature of our room, it makes sense to say that we then will turn on the central heating, because we know that this will change the room's temperature in agreement with our wishes. But what knowledge, rules, insights, intuitions, or whatever

12. Bevir, *Logic,* 61. In fact, this may surprise. For would his position not require him to hold that a text always does have a meaning itself, namely, the one to be associated with the intentions of the author who wrote that text? For if texts don't have meanings themselves and if meanings are "always meanings for individuals," how can we prevent false and absurd interpretations? It follows that abandoning the claim that texts have meanings themselves inevitably invites a bottomless skepticism.

could we rely on when trying to figure out which text of hundreds of pages will realize a certain intention? That would require an intelligence of truly cosmic proportions.

All this suggests that the intentionalist account of textual meaning is not a promising candidate for clarifying representational historical meaning. Indeed, even if we were prepared to grant to it the benefit of the doubt for the history of ideas, it would not work for our purpose here for two reasons. In the first place, it certainly makes sense to say that historical texts such as Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Sieyès's *Qu'est-ce que c'est le Tiers État?* were written with the explicit intention of having a certain effect on contemporary political realities—even though this view has the unpleasant disadvantage of degrading all great political philosophers of the past to the sorry status of political pamphleteers. Nevertheless, this undoubtedly is part of the truth about how to read and interpret those texts and where we can therefore agree with Skinner and Bevir.

However, we cannot appeal to any such intentions in the case of academic historical writing. For the intention informing historical writing is always to get to "the truth" (leaving aside here the question of how this notion is to be understood) about some part of the past. All the historian's efforts when investigating the available documentary evidence—his exploration of the existing literature and his discussion with other historians and so on—serve this one goal. Situating the historical text's meaning in the intention the historian had when writing it—as recommended by intentionalists such as Skinner and Bevir—would lead to the inconvenient conclusion that all historical texts have one and the same meaning—namely, to tell the truth about part of the past. But is this something that can properly be said to be a text's meaning?[13]

Second, recall Bevir's acknowledgment above that texts have no meaning themselves and that any meaning they can be said to have is attributed to them by their authors and their readers from the outside, as it were. Whatever the merits of this view of the text may be, it will be clear that it does not explain how to understand representational historical meaning. Intentionalism ignores the question of how meaning may come into being (if it does so!) when we rely on representation for making sense of part of the world. And we should not blame intentionalists for not being interested in this issue, since

13. I have some additional reservations about Bevir's proposals with regard to authorial intention, but they are of no relevance in the present context. See M. Bevir and F. R. Ankersmit, "Exchanging Ideas," *Rethinking History* 4 (Winter 2000); 351–373.

their problem is how to understand and read texts that exist already, when the trajectory of representation has been left behind. Nevertheless, for exactly this same reason, intentionalism à la Skinner and Bevir can be of no use to us in the present context.[14]

4. White on the Origins of Representational (Historical) Meaning

Let's start with the well-known Whitean quasi-structuralist grid of the four tropes, modes of emplotment, argument and of ideological implication that is introduced in the introduction of *Metahistory,* applied to eight historians and philosophers of history in the substance of the book, and theoretically refined in *Tropics of Discourse.*[15] White gave the following elucidation of the role of the grid in the writing of history:

> Before the historian can bring to bear upon the data of the historical field the conceptual apparatus he will have to represent and to explain it, he must first prefigure the field—that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception. This poetic act is indistinguishable from the linguistic act in which the field is made ready for interpretation as a domain of a particular kind. That is to say, before a given domain can be interpreted, it must first be construed as a ground inhabited by discernible figures. The figures, in turn, must be conceived to be classifiable as distinctive orders, classes, genera, and species of phenomena.[16]

This can be read as a statement on representational (historical) meaning or, rather, on how that kind of meaning comes into being. The past as such, "the historical field," is meaningless. Meaning comes into being only after the historical field has been "prefigured" by the historian, to use White's terminology. At first blush this may remind us of the intentionalist's position, for in both cases the historian is needed for the attribution of meaning to things or texts. But there is a crucial difference. White would never agree with the intentionalist's claim that texts have no meanings and that whatever meaning they have comes from the outside, as I formulated it above. For him

14. For some further problems with authorial intention, see chapter 11, section 2.

15. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 29ff.; the most succinct and convincing of White's theoretical claims in question is to be found in Hayden White, "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978), 81–101.

16. White, *Metahistory,* 30.

the historical text truly does have a meaning itself, which comes into being in the process of the prefiguration of the historical field. For him meaning is an intrinsic property of the text, requiring no readers as its condition of existence.

Instead, we should agree with Hans Kellner when he insists on the similarities between White's four tropes, etc. and the four sets of the Kantian categories of the understanding.[17] Indeed, it makes sense to say that the Kantian categories of the understanding make knowledge possible and that White's tropology, in its turn, explains how historical knowledge expressing textual meaning is possible.[18] So we may wonder whether White's quasi-Kantian tropological model can be of help to us in our effort to define representational (historical) meaning.

Several obstacles present themselves. In the first place, a large part of Kant's first *Critique* was devoted to what he called a transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding, explaining why these categories were conditional for the possibility of knowledge. White does not offer such a transcendental deduction with his tropological scheme—and he can therefore not be said to have explained textual meaning and how it originates. It must be pointed out, though, that the substance of *Metahistory* offers us an application of the scheme to the writings of a number of nineteenth-century historians and philosophers of history and that the fruitfulness of that application can be seen as the practical test of the validity of the scheme. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Few theorists will doubt that White's tropological scheme has been remarkably successful if seen from that perspective. So it would certainly be worth the trouble to explain this success by devising a transcendental deduction of White's tropology. And as soon as we have such a philosophical justification of tropology, we might investigate its capacities of accounting for representational historical meaning. But for the time being we can only pronounce a *non liquet*.

But there is another problem. The passage from *Metahistory* quoted above clearly deals with the problem of historical writing, hence of how historians succeed in making sense of the evidence of the past. The focus here is on

17. H. Kellner, "Hayden White and the Kantian Discourse: Tropology, Narrative and Freedom," in *The Philosophy of Discourse: The Rhetorical Turn in Twentieth-Century Thought*, ed. Charles Sills (Portsmouth, UK, 1992).

18. An important difference, though, is that in the Whitean system the historian can choose between different possibilities of how to combine tropes, modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication. Of course, the Kantian categories of the understanding leave no room for such freedom of movement.

the trajectory from the past to the historical text produced by the historian. However, this is not how White uses the tropological scheme. For in *Metahistory,* and elsewhere, he is predominantly interested in how we should read historical texts. Perhaps there is no reason for worries about this from the perspective of White's own purposes. But when we investigate his tropological scheme for what light it may shed on the issue of historical meaning, we will get into trouble. For if translated in terms of meaning, the trajectory suggested by the quoted passage will read as a theory on how the historian gives meaning to the past, whereas White's own use of the tropological scheme primarily deals with what meaning(s) the reader of a historical text may discern in that text. And it is by no means clear that we have to do with the same conception of meaning in either case. It is not self-evidently true that the meaning of a historical text is identical with the meaning that this text attributes to part of the past. Admittedly, one may conceive of an argument for that view. For example, one might say that a historical text was written with the explicit intention of attributing to part of the past some specific meaning—and that *this* is its meaning. But that would get us back again to the intentionalist argument that we rejected in the previous section.

Perhaps other arguments can be found for identifying a text's meaning with the meaning it gives to the past. But in my view we should be skeptical with regard to any such attempt. I call to mind here my argument in chapter 3, where I opposed interpretation and representation, which had, of course, the implication that the two should not be confused with each other. However, any argument to the effect that a text's meaning (interpretation) is identical with the meaning it gives to the past (representation) will inevitably run counter to the demand to strictly distinguish between matters of representation and interpretation. So we may conclude that we should not have high hopes of elucidating representational historical meaning with the help of White's tropology. Again, this cannot be constructed as an argument against White's tropology since he never used it to explain meaning as discussed here. He was simply interested in other things—and who would blame him for that?

5. Representational Meaning

In this section I shall assume that there is such a thing as representational (historical) meaning and that our intuitions that historical texts on, for example, the French Revolution or the Renaissance—and these words themselves—do have a meaning are correct. However, I shall leave the notion of representational (historical) meaning undefined. Nor will such a definition be pro-

posed as conclusion to this section and chapter. This section will instead present representational (historical) meaning as a primitive term that cannot be defined in terms more basic than itself– and that must therefore remain undefined—whereas other notions, such as Fregean truth, reference, and meaning, can be derived from it. One could also read this backwards and then say that in this section a *recursive* definition of representational meaning is given. But when leaving undecided here the question of how to define representational meaning, I explicitly exclude from this generous hospitality intentional meaning as it was discussed in section 3. not only because of the arguments already raised in section 3 but because of one additional argument that may be leveled against it.

Think of the following example. The Russian author Aleksandr Tarasov-Rodionov wrote a novel entitled *Chocolate.* Its main protagonist is Aleksei Zudin, president of the Tcheka in Leningrad. Zudin is a devoted Communist ready to sacrifice his life to the interest of Soviet-Russia and the Communist party. Nonetheless, he becomes the target of the most ridiculous rumors, which some party members both from Leningrad and Moscow use to accuse him of having provoked and supported an insurrection in Leningrad. Zudin is condemned to death, and it is most eloquently explained to him by a former friend (!) why his execution is truly inevitable. Zudin allows himself to be convinced by his friend and walks up to the firing squad with feelings of a sublime elation and in the conviction that acceptance of the death penalty is supreme proof of his unconditional loyalty to the party.

Clearly, Tarasov-Rodionov's novel cannot fail to remind readers of the horrors of the great purge under Stalin in the years following the assault on Sergei Kirov in 1934. They will see the book as a moving and impressive indictment of the criminality of the Soviet regime—and for them this will be a large part of the book's *meaning.* But this will change dramatically when they learn that Tarasov-Rodionov (1885–1938) wrote this book in 1922, when Lenin was still alive and more than a decade before Stalin's show trials, and that the author intended the book to show how a sincere Communist ought to behave under the circumstances it described. The book's intentional meaning is thus the complete opposite of the meaning that the readers initially gave to it. The discovery comes as a shock to the readers because. they have now had to revise the meaning it had for them after becoming acquainted with the author's true intention. So texts can have a meaning different from authorial intention, and it would be wrong to claim that they can have only intentional meaning. For if that claim were correct, information about Tarasov-Rodionov's real intentions could not have come as such a shock to its readers. Consistency would require the advocate of

intentionalist meaning to hold that the book should have been incomprehensible and meaningless as long as the reader did not know about its authorial intention—as apparently was the case before the shock came.

Of course, the argument given here vaguely resembles Frege's on the morning star and the evening star. The recognition that both these proper names could refer to one and the same object (i.e., the planet Venus) was the shock that required Frege to postulate the concept of meaning. And so it is here—more or less. For here the argument was that Tarasov-Rodionov's text must be granted an intrinsic meaning because of our shock at finding out that the intentional meaning of the text was so widely at odds with what we initially and naively saw as that intrinsic meaning. Indeed, if texts did not possess such an intrinsic meaning, we could not possibly be so deeply shocked by finding out about Tarasov-Rodionov's intentions when writing *Chocolate.*

In order to explain the nature of our sense of shock here I'd like to recall what was said in chapter 3 on the relationship between interpretation and representation. We found there that representation precedes interpretation and that contemporary theorists of interpretation tend to forget about the anchors that texts have in what is represented by them. So it is here. The text of Tarasov-Rodionov's novel has its semantic roots in the imaginary reality that is *represented* in it. The book is not only a text that we can interpret in one way or another; the text is also bound to an imaginary reality represented by it. This explains why readers of the book will experience no problem with grasping the text's meaning, even if they may be in doubt, ignorant, uninterested, or simply completely wrong about its authorial intention. Moreover, representational meaning may differ from interpretational meaning; a text's author may have chosen the wrong textual means of expressing his authorial intentions. Especially in the case of complex texts about complex topics, this will be the rule rather than an exception. Speaking generally, authorial intention will often tempt authors to subordinate interpretational to representational meaning. Suppose P uses the sentence S "Naked short selling was prohibited for the first time in history by the Dutch government in 1609"[19] when intending to say, "Bankers are the pickpockets of the twenty-first century" (an appropriate choice, for that matter).[20] If so, the fact that

19. This caused the Amsterdam merchant Isaac Lemaire—who was speculating against the fledgling Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie—to lose the fantastic sum of one and a half million guilders without going bankrupt.

20. Insofar as there is a (weak) causal link between these two sentences (naked short selling having been one of the reasons that the contemporary taxpayer now has to bail out an irresponsible banking sector), this raises an interesting question. Suppose you have a coherent narrative mentioning

the sentence when uttered by P has the intentional meaning of expressing an unpleasant truth about bankers does not in the least prevent S from having at the same time a (quite different) representational meaning as well. Admittedly, intentional meaning and representational meaning will often coincide to a greater or lesser extent—but sometimes they may be radically opposed to each other, as is shown by the example of the novel by Tarasov-Rodionov.[21] This requires us to distinguish between representional and interpretational or intentional meaning and may explain why I began my discussion here by explicitly excluding intentional meaning from the domain of representional (historical) meaning. The identification of the two meanings with each other is begging the question.

So what we now have is (1) a (historical) text and (2) its representional meaning. I shall now proceed to the question of how to fit representional meaning into the account of representation given in the previous chapters. I shall use Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the sign as my point of departure. The explanation is that Saussure also starts with the very simple scheme of sign and meaning *without committing himself to any definition of meaning* (such as representational meaning in this section) and, consequently, is happy to characterize the relationship between a sign and its meaning as arbitrary. So Saussure's conception of the sign thus gives us three things—just like that of Frege *e tutti quanti* and that of representation. First, there is the sound pattern of a spoken word; second, there is what that word means (which Saussure sometimes describes as its meaning and sometimes as a concept, leaving to his readers the question whether meanings and concepts are identical and, if so, why this should or should not be the case); and in the third place there is the sign combining sound and meaning: "[I]n our terminology a sign is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern. But in current usage the term *sign* generally refers to the sound pattern alone, e.g. the word *arbor.* It is forgotten that if *arbor* is called a sign, it is only because it carries with it the concept 'tree,' so that the sensory part of the term implies reference to the whole."[22]

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the events $e_1, e_2, \ldots e_n$ and that $c_1, c_2, \ldots c_n$ are the causal consequences of the former set of causes. Would $c_1, c_2, \ldots c_n$ then also have to be a coherent narrative? If it would not—as I tend to believe myself without being able to explain why—it would follow that the discourse of narrative is basically different from the discourse of causes and that therefore each attempt to reduce the former to the latter is doomed to failure. This would also have its implications for the mind/body problem. For if the mind operates narratively or, rather, *representationally,* its workings can then never be explained on the basis of a causalistic, neurophysiological account of the mind.

21. When discussing Kafka's parable "Vor dem Gesetz" in chapter 11, we will find that there are even texts having a representational meaning only and *no* intentional meaning.

22. F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* trans. and ann. Roy Harris (London, 1983), 67.

It may be that the relationship between the sign and its meaning is arbitrary; nevertheless, they come infinitely close to each other, suggesting that no mechanism other than sign and meaning themselves is responsible for their union. As Saussure puts it, "[A] language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of the paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound."[23] But why should this be so? one wonders. Perhaps it is because the sheer arbitrariness of the union of sign and meaning needs to be overruled by this inextricable tie—the more arbitrary the union, the more inextricable the tie must be in order to prevent language from disintegrating into a mere utterance of meaningless and incoherent sounds.

Most helpful in our present discussion, however, is Saussure's theory of the interrelationship of signs. In the first place he argues that signs cannot be defined individually but that they mutually define each other. Second, he claims that meanings in a language can be strung together in two ways—(1) syntagmatically and (2) by association (or paradigmatically, as is ordinarily said since Jakobson). I shall begin with the first claim.

When defining the sign as the union of a sound and a meaning, Saussure rejected the view that a sign's meaning should be defined in terms of what it stands for, as paradigmatically is the case with proper names: the proper name Napoleon stands for the man so called. Saussure refers to this conception of the sign as "nomenclaturism." The origins of this view can be traced back to the Book of Genesis, where God gave each living creature its name. It was also the theory of meaning advocated by Plato in the *Cratylus* and by Aristotle when he questioned in *De Interpretatione* whether someone who had never seen an elephant could know the correct meaning of the word "elephant." Similar conceptions of the relationship between the sign (or word) and its meaning were defended explicitly by Locke and Leibniz.[24] More important, nomenclaturism still was Frege's point of departure. For the argument in *Sense and Reference* was, basically, that we will run into semantic

23. Ibid., 111.

24. R. Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words* (London, 1988) 7–11, 27. Joseph points out, though, that Saussure's position closely resembles that of the Stoics: "[I]nterestingly, what has proved to be the most controversial aspect of the Saussurian sign is in fact the most venerable. The decoupling of the signified from things in the world goes all the way back to the Stoics and their conception of the *semainomenon* as incorporeal." See J. Joseph, "The Linguistic Sign," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sausssure,* ed. C. Sanders (Cambridge, 2004), 74.

impasses when we have at our disposal only the notions of truth and reference and that these impasses can be resolved only by adding the notion of meaning (sense) to the semanticist's theoretical inventory. So there can be no doubt here about what comes first and what comes next. You have first the thing and then the name that is attached to it like a label to a box to remind us of what is in it. Though the later Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy present us with a quite different picture, there can be no doubt that the nomenclaturist bias that the philosophy of language had inherited from Frege is still prominently present in contemporary philosophy of language. One need only be reminded here of Quine's and Davidson's attempts to derive meaning from truth.

Self-evidently, when cutting through the referential ties between words and the world, Saussure is compelled to present us with some believable alternative theory about how meaning comes into being. As we saw in the previous section, Hayden White had also asked himself the question of the origins of representational (historical) meaning. He answered it by an appeal to a quasi-transcendentalist deeper level of figural meaning in language. This is not Saussure's strategy: for him there is no sphere or level outside that of meaning itself in terms of which meaning can be defined or explained: "In a given language, all the words which express neighbouring ideas help define one another's meaning. Each of a set of synonyms like *redouter* ('to dread'), *craindre* ('to fear"), *avoir peur* ('be afraid') has its particular value only because they stand in contrast with each other. If redouter ('to dread') did not exist, its content would be shared out amongst its competitors. On the other hand, words are also enriched by contact with other words."[25]

If something—a word, a sentence, a text, or just anything else (any restriction imposed here could be rephrased in a reduction of meaning to something outside it and is for that reason prohibited)—has meaning, this is because other such words, sentences, or texts have meaning; but these, in their turn, have meaning because still other words, sentences, and texts have meaning—and so on indefinitely. But this endless concatenation of meaning will never get us outside the level of meaning itself. In this way meaning is *itself* the locus of the birth of meaning. If you ask for the origins of meaning, other meanings will be the answer, and you will never be able to jump outside this endless concatenation of meanings. But, as the quote from Saussure makes clear, this does certainly not entail that meaning could not be *fixed*. We cannot *define* meaning—because there is nothing outside meaning or, rather,

25. Saussure, *Course*, 114.

prior to meaning (such as truth and reference) in terms of which it could be defined. But the *content* of meaning—what meaning a word, sentence, or text actually *has* in individual cases—can be fixed, established, or determined in terms of its contrast(s) with other such words, sentences, or texts. And then a reality outside the text will come into play in agreement with our claims made in chapter 3 for the text's anchors in what it represents—as is the case in the practice of historical writing. The impossibility of defining meaning does not in the least imply that we should now despair of discovering the meaning of words, sentences, texts, or of whatever we decide to see as a conveyor of meaning. Again, think of history. Arguing from the impossibility of *defining* meaning to the impossibility of *fixing* meaning has been the main fallacy of deconstructivism and the occasion of many of its unwarranted assertions.

If meaning can properly be said to have no other source than itself, we may have our doubts about Harris's claim that there is a good deal of agreement between Saussure's theory of meaning and the one that was developed by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations.*[26] Think of the latter's "look at the sentence as an instrument, and at its sense as its employment"[27] and of his language-game conception of the use of language. Social practice here gives us the meaning of words. "The meaning is the use," as the slogan goes. This is clearly at odds with Saussure's proposal not to look outside meaning itself for the meaning of meaning. Needless to say, this is not meant as a (further) argument in favor of Saussure's theory of meaning but only to stress the differences between his and Wittgenstein's later theory of meaning.

As it happens, there is no better example to illustrate Saussure's theory of meaning than the writing of history. Think of a word such as "Renaissance." Both historians and philosophers of history incline toward a nomenclaturist view of that word and then feel tempted to claim that the past must contain a very complex individual "thing," which the word "Renaissance" refers to in the same way that it undoubtedly contains a thing that we can refer to by the proper name of the Italian painter Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516). But, then, what is this thing called the Renaissance? Does it include Giovanni Bellini? (Probably yes.) Does it include Bellini's portrait of Fra Teodoro da Urbino posing as Saint Dominic? (Once again, probably yes.) But does it

26. The thesis defended by Harris in his book is "that the views of Saussure and Wittgenstein show an important convergence which is not commonly acknowledged; specifically their belief that the most enlightening analogy one can entertain in seeking to understand how language works is the analogy between a language and a rule-governed game." Harris, *Language,* x.

27. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1974), sec. 421.

include Fra Teodoro himself? (Now things are getting difficult.) Fra Teodoro posing as Saint Dominic? (Even more difficult.) Bellini's decision to paint Fra Teodoro as Saint Dominic? (Now things are becoming esoteric.) The neurophysiological processes in Bellini's brain corresponding to this decision? (What should we say about this?) It is impossible to individuate this particular thing, and any attempt to do so will at most give us a necessary but never sufficient condition for fixing the reference of words such as "Baroque," "Renaissance," and so on, as we found in chapter 5.[28] This does certainly not imply, for that matter, that notions such as the Renaissance can float through the ages as unpredictably and arbitrarily as the clouds drift along the sky; of course the Renaissance is to be associated exclusively with things taking place in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. The notion is inextricably linked to that part of the past—and that part exclusively—if only thanks to the reference made to it in the sentences contained by a text on the Renaissance.

One could say, though, that each historical text on the Renaissance is an attempt—or rather, a proposal—to fix the reference of the word. But then some other historian will write another text on the Renaissance with a different proposal for fixing the reference. It is an illusion that sometime a historian would write a text on the Renaissance fixing the reference of that word acceptable to all contemporary and future historians. It would mean the end of the debate on the Renaissance; and as everyone acquainted with the practice of historical writing will know, such debates never end and are not meant to be ended. So one may then ask oneself, if no historians will ever succeed in fixing the reference of the word "Renaissance," what makes them continue a hopeless debate that is condemned beforehand to remain inconclusive forever? The answer to that question can be found in the last sentence of the passage from Saussure quoted above—namely, that it enriches our understanding of the past and that this is why historians propose notions such as the Renaissance and go on discussing them ad infinitum and why this is a most rational and valuable enterprise.

To recognize this, we need to understand a few basic points. In the first place, the fact that notions such as the Renaissance or the Cold War are always phrased in the singular is misleading. Again, there is no unique individual thing in the past itself that these terms can be said to refer to. In fact, there are as many Renaissances and Cold Wars as there are historical texts

28. "Which *facts* belong to the Renaissance, to the French Revolution, to the world war?—There is no such 'belonging.' It will always be as many as my mind recognizes to be related to the phenomenon in question." J. Huizinga, "De wetenschap der geschiedenis," in Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken*, vol. 7 (Haarlem, Neth., 1950), 128.

on them. And it is true that each such text self-referentially fixes the reference of each use of the term. All the sentences on the past contained in some historical text on the Renaissance self-referentially fix the reference of the word "Renaissance" for this specific text.[29] And each other text on the Renaissance does the same for that other text. So it would have been much better if we had always talked of plural Renaissance*s* instead of a single Renaissance. Many misunderstandings about the nature of historical writing would then have been avoided. That would have been a constant reminder of the fact that words like the Renaissance obey a logic that is different from the one obtaining for proper names such as Napoleon or Giovanni Bellini that only an analysis of (historical) representation can give us access to. We would then not have been such an easy victim of the temptation to adopt for notions such as the Renaissance the same nomenclaturist attitude as we rightly do for such proper names.

In the second place, the self-referentiality of the historical text is not dependent on the presence in it (or in its title) of concepts like the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Hellenism, the Middle Ages, etc. Each representation—simply by virtue of being a representation—possesses this dimension of self-referentiality. For each representation (of the past) requires us to read or understand the sentences it contains recursively and self-referentially as defining the nature of that representation (i.e., not of its represented!). These sentences always have a double function: (1) they refer to and describe the past, and (2) as the constitutive properties of a specific representation of the past they self-referentially define the nature of that representation.

But they do not fix its meaning. This is done only in the semantic interaction between different historical representations, just as in Saussure's example the words *redouter, craindre,* and *avoir peur* mutually define each other. Similarly, just as the contact between these words enriches the meaning of each of them, so it is with historical representations. The difference here is the principal mechanism. Each such word—or historical representation—defines itself as being different from other such meanings. For only this is its raison d'être. It follows that the more words (and representations) there are in the neighborhood (to use Saussure's terminology) of one of them, the more securely it will be fixed, and the more clearly it will stand out against those others. To put it dramatically, if we have only one representation of some part of the past, we have in fact no representation at all. With representations it is as if you have a pile of very soft cushions, where the form of each

29. See chapter 5, section 2.

is changed to some extent by each new cushion that is thrown on that pile. And the cushions need each other to have any more or less fixed form at all. It is the presence of other cushions weighing on them that give them form and consistency. So a representation without any rival representations disintegrates into its constitutive individual sentences. Inversely, each representation of part of the past that is added to an already existing set will help refine the semantic contours of all others in that (always open) set. This is why we may agree with Saussure's claim that meanings may enrich each other. Just as clarity about the meaning of a representation of the past is conditional for any pronouncement about its representational truth (as defined in the previous chapter), so is semantic enrichment.

There is an interesting conundrum here. At stake in this discussion is the meaning of the text in the sense of being intrinsic to it; meaning is not to be seen as something that is projected on it from the outside in the way that Bevir understood textual meaning. However, it might be objected that if a text's meaning comes into being in the interaction with those of other texts, meaning must be extrinsic to the text here as well. Such a conclusion would indeed be justified if a text did not yet have a meaning of itself that would be added to it only afterwards. But it is essential to Saussure's conception of the sign (and hence of text and representation as discussed here) that there are no signs without meanings (or without a soundstructure). It is part of Saussure's definition of the sign that it unites meaning and sound structure. And the fact that a text's meaning is codetermined by other, comparable texts is not incompatible with saying that a text's meaning is intrinsic to it.

One final remark on differentialist meaning. Saussure is ordinarily seen as the father of structuralism. And that term may invite associations that are inappropriate for historical representation. I specifically have in mind here the idea that structures logically precede the elements structured by them. Think of the structure of a ship or of an organization. The structure may there persist even though all its elements are replaced in course of time by others, as is the case with Neurath's ship or with an army continuously replacing soldiers fallen in battle. Sometimes Saussure comes close to this—for example, when he uses the letters of the alphabet to point out that we recognize them not as such but only thanks to their being different from others. So typography does not matter as long as the relevant clues for differentiation between individual letters are retained.[30] Obviously, in the case of historical representation no such structures are available: the set of rep-

30. Saussure, *Course*, 117, 118.

resentations available at any given moment will determine how each one is differentiated from the others and hence what its meaning is. In that case we had better speak of patterns rather than structures.

This has its consequences for a theme that is central to Saussure's theory of meaning. Holdcroft observes that Saussure interchangeably uses the terms "signification" and "value" (undoubtedly standing for "semantic value"), and he then comments: "[N]ow, since values are necessarily the product of a system, the term 'value' would seem to have quite different connotations from the term 'signification,' since the latter as used traditionally has no necessary connection with a system."[31]

This issue goes right to the heart of Saussure's theory of language and meaning and hence to what is said here about texts and representations. On the one hand language is a system (a *langue,* as Saussure puts it) and the system determines the "value" of its components, but on the other there is the actual use of language (*parole* in his terminology), which will give us Saussure's differentialist signification. But the set of available historical representations can never qualify as a system or a structure since the set changes with each new historical representation. On the other hand, the system or structure of language will remain what it was regardless of whatever number of new sentences are uttered in it. So in the former case we are dealing with meaning as signification rather than with meaning as value.[32]

Finally, Saussure develops a theory on how to map the interaction between the different components projecting such patterns of meanings. In his view all such interaction can be located in a space defined by two axes, the syntagmatic axis and that of association:

> For Saussure, the meaning of any linguistic sign is not isolable from that of other signs in *la langue.* This is because he envisages a language as a system of signs held together by chains of syntagmatic and associative relations. Syntagmatic relations he describes as relations *in praesentia:* in the phrase *my house* the individual signs *my* and *house* are syntagmatically related. Such relations are invariably expressed in the dimension of linearity, even though they are not linear relations as such. Associative relations Saussure describes as relations *in absentia:* in my house the individual sign my is associatively related to *you, his, her* etc., while the sign house is associatively related to *home, domicile, dwelling, apartment* etc. The phrase my house thus represents a syntagmatically organized

31. D. Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge, 1991), 108.

32. See my "The Transfiguration of Distance into Function," *History and Theory 50* (2011): 136–150.

selection from a large range of associative possibilities made available by the language.[33]

The adjective "syntagmatic" is certainly correct since it is suggestive of a putting together of individual entities. Nevertheless, this is also done in associative relations insofar as coupling associatively house with home, domicile, etc. also combines these signs. The difference, however, is that in the syntagmatic relationship the meanings of the semantic units truly intersect with each other and then redefine this intersection with regard to the meaning of these units. This is where the syntagmatic relationship comes close to the figure of metonymy: for in both cases a semantic field is narrowed down to a specific part of it. Think of the metonymy "fifty sails" when it stands for "fifty ships." This is why both Saussure's syntagmatic relationship and metonymy can be regarded as the embryonic phase of the sentence. The semantic intersection produced by each of them is the obvious predecessor of a sentence's subject term, whereas the remainder of the combined semantic field then crystallizes out as its predicate. The syntagmatic combination *my house* then more or less spontaneously develops into the *sentence* "this is my house," realizing the linearity Saussure claims to be typical of the syntagmatic relationship. Not surprisingly, Saussure observes that "the most typical kind of syntagma is the sentence."[34] Needless to say, no such thing would hold for Saussure's associative relationships. These are metaphorical instead of metonymical. For metaphor is the figure of speech requiring us to turn to what we associate with a certain sign in order to grasp the meaning of the metaphor in which it occurs.[35]

Now let's turn again to historical representation with this in mind. In the preceding chapters we found that historical representation cannot be modeled on the true statement and that representation is basically metaphorical. Historical representation therefore leaves no room at all for Saussure's syntagmatic axis.

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33. Harris, *Language,* 23. Observe that in the last sentence of this quote Harris's suggestion is that syntagmatic ordering is a specific case of associative ordering. If this interpretation is correct, Saussure's model of the two axes should be replaced by that of a set and a subset of that set.

34. Saussure, *Course,* 122. Holdcroft cites the following comment on Saussure's exposition of the syntagmatic relationship by one of his students: "[T]his question of the order of the sub-units in the word recalls exactly that of the place of words in a sentence." See Holdcroft, *Saussure,* 100.

35. Illuminating is a comparison Saussure suggested himself for clarifying his intentions: "[A] linguistic unit may be compared to a single part of a building, e.g. a column. A column is related in certain ways to the architrave it supports. This disposition, involving two units co-present in space, is comparable to a syntagmatic relation. On the other hand, if the column is Doric, it will evoke comparisons with the other architectural orders (Ionic, Corinthian, etc.) which are not in this instance spatially co-present. This relation is associative." See Saussure, *Course,* 122.

Nevertheless, the borderline between association and syntagma can in two ways be "transgressed" (to use the most appropriate word in this context). In order to see this, we should begin by recalling that representation is a three-place operator, keeping apart represented reality and what we have called a representation's presented. The presented upholds the metaphorical dimension of representation: represented reality is presented in representation in terms of the representation's presented, as the metaphor "a is b" requires us to see a in terms of b. If, then, represented reality and the presented are collapsed into one, this must automatically mean the end of the metaphorical faculty of representation and hence of representation itself.

In the first place, the issue can simply be forced by decreeing, assuming, or arguing that in representation represented reality and the presented are identical. This is explicitly and deliberately done in speculative philosophies of history: one specific aspect of the past, hence a certain *presented,* is then upgraded from being a mere aspect of part of the past into an identifiable individual object in the past whose history can be written in the way one may write a biography of Napoleon or Churchill. Thus Hegel's philosophy of history gives us the biography of the Spirit striving for its self-awareness, whereas Marxism gives us that of the class struggle finding its happy end in the classless society. In all such cases such histories can be predicated on Napoleon, Churchill, Spirit, the class struggle, etc., functioning as the ever-present implied subject term in such histories. The collapse of the presented into represented reality then results in the syntagmatic union of Napoleon, Spirit, etc. on the one hand and what is said about them in these histories on the other.[36]

But as we know from Mink's argument about Universal History, much the same may take place in a more surreptitious and insidious manner[37]—for example, when the triumphs and successes of historical debate, the cogency of the historian's argument, and a proud awareness of the progress that has been made in historical writing all unite into tempting us to believe that there existed in the past a Renaissance or an Enlightenment in much the same way that we cannot doubt that Napoleon and Churchill existed. And Mink is surely right in saying that until now few historians and philosophers of history have been able to resist the temptations of the belief in a Universal History—which goes a long way to explaining their

36. This syntagmatic collapse of the presented and the represented is, by the way, one more way of explaining what Mink had had in mind with his Universal History and hence an error committed even by historians and philosophers of history having no sympathy at all for speculative systems.

37. See chapter 2.

blindness to the fact that historical representation is not a two-place but a three–place operator.

Last, there is one more way to transgress the borderline between Saussure's metaphorical associations and his metonymical syntagmatic orderings. Let us take an admittedly wholly imaginary scenario. Suppose that the historical debate on, for example, the Renaissance were to continue over the centuries. In the course of time all the relevant documentary evidence left to us has been discovered, discussed, and explored from each possible perspective. Suppose that in the course of time disagreement among historians about the Renaissance and about how the phenomenon has to be understood decreases, until finally some kind of consensus comes into being about the Renaissance. Put differently, at this late stage in the historiographical debate the term "the Renaissance" gradually acquires the same meaning for all historians writing about it.

The word will then acquire a fixed meaning in much the same way that words like "Antarctica" or "Galaxy" have a meaning that we can find out about by consulting a dictionary. An aspect will then be upgraded to the status of a thing, and representational meaning will have become dictionary meaning. Fixation of meaning will also fix a new referent—a referent that was, until then, not yet part of the inventory of the world. The fixation of meaning will then fix reference in much the same way that the meaning of the proper name Phosphorus or Napoleon fixes its referent. Once again, though now with meaning as its point of departure, the representation's represented reality will collapse with the representation's presented—and the Saussurian notion of the sign will have to give way to its Fregean counterpart and its metonymical relation between a name and its referent.

I said above that this scenario is imaginary. There are two sides to this. First, a warning. We have discussed the transgression of the borderline between metaphorical association and syntagmatic ordering and found that this led to the creation of new dictionary meanings and to the upgrading of aspects to things. This might invite the reader to say that since representational meaning can apparently be found in aspects and/or a representation's presented, we would now have a definition of representational meaning after all. But this conclusion does not follow. For this transgression of metaphorical association and syntagmatic ordering was explicitly said to be illegal and to sin against the logic of representation. Obviously, no acceptable definition of representational meaning can be inferred from any such illegal operations. So representational meaning remains what it was: undefined.

Next, one may speculate with Vico and Nietzsche that this illegal transgression is how literal meaning comes into being. They argued that language

is originally metaphorical—and representational, as I would like to add—and that the meaning of words was fixed in a long war of semantic attrition within which metaphor, via catachresis, finally crystallized into standard literal meaning. This certainly is a compelling story, but I shall not venture to pronounce about its truth or plausibility. Nevertheless, if people believe it to be basically correct, it would follow that (historical) representation logically precedes our ordinary and scientific use and that Saussure gives us the origins of meaning and Frege its later codification. Together with Saussure we begin with meaning. and we will end up with Frege, truth, and subsequent philosophy of language. Isn't that a nice and compelling history of language?[38]

6. Conclusion: Truth, Reference, and Meaning in Representation

There are two ways of doing philosophical semantics and philosophy in general. In the first place one can take one's point of departure in one supposedly indubitable philosophical fact in order to see what all of philosophy looks like if seen from that perspective. This is the philosophical method we will associate with Descartes and, to a lesser extent, with Kant. The *cogito* was the point of departure from which Descartes hoped to give a philosophical account of all of human knowledge of the world. And much the same is true of the Kantian transcendentalist project. When using this method everything depends on whether the initial point of departure has been well chosen. If it is not, few valuable results are to be expected. But this is not all. Even success has its ironic dangers here. An illustration is how the very success of the Kantian system invited its sublimation in idealism. All of the world and of knowledge could satisfactorily be accounted for from the perspective of the Kantian transcendental subject. And precisely this made possible the leap of the Kantian system into the skies of the loftiest idealist speculation of a Fichte and Schelling. The temptation to explain will often result in explaining too much.

The other method begins by establishing a number of what one might call philosophical facts. It asks what might account for and give coherence

38. Discussing this issue, Zammito writes, "[B]ut whereas Ankersmit sees this [i.e., the transition from Saussure to Frege] as *merely* stipulative, I take this entrenchment of conceptual terms to be *constitutive* of the evolution of language and knowledge, and specifically of the disciplinary discourse of history." J. Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 167. As will be clear, I do wholly agree with Zammito on this.

to these facts. This is the more modest method adopted here. I did not start with some basic philosophical fact but began by exploring the notion of (historical) representation. And I did so with no other ambition than to fill a lacuna in contemporary philosophy of language—namely, its failure (or stubborn resistance) to investigate the use of language in complex texts aiming at accounting for a complex reality. In my effort to compensate for this lacuna I established a number of philosophical facts with regard to (historical) representation and the question whether existing conceptions of truth and reference could meaningfully be applied to it. I made no attempt to fit these facts into one coherent whole or to conceive of them from one unitary perspective. If there was one common ground in my enumeration of these philosophical facts, it was a merely *negative* one—namely, that the existing philosophy of language is unable to account for them in a satisfactory way. We have been investigating in this book a "leftover" of philosophy of language, but a quite substantial leftover.

In this chapter the focus was on representational meaning and on what can be said about it on the basis of the relevant philosophical facts established with regard to representational truth and reference. No effort was made, nevertheless, to define meaning in terms of truth and reference—or at most we could say with Saussure that meaning defines itself. Each effort to define meaning refers us to *other* meanings, and so on ad infinitum. Representational meaning must be conceived of as the position from which the philosophical facts about (representational) truth and reference can be perceived for what they are in the case of representation, just as I may see my room from the place where I am sitting right now but without seeing that place itself. Speaking generally, respecting the relevant philosophical facts will require us to always leave our central philosophical concept undefined—which in this case is that of representational meaning. Not acquiescing in this will inevitably result in the distortion of these philosophical facts.

Taking together the results of the last three chapters will give us the following picture. If we wish to understand representation, meaning has to be our undefined primary term. Next, representational meaning must be situated at the point of intersection of representation and description since we now know how to move from representation to representationalist truth and reference and their Fregean counterparts. But this is a route that can be followed in one direction only; it is impossible to derive representational meaning from the semantic matrix proposed by Frege and still adopted, in one variant or other, in most of contemporary philosophy of language.

The paradox is that the text—apparently a most contrived and artificial linguistic construction if compared with the simple and ascetic structure of the true statement—is in fact more basic than the statement. However, we believe the statement to be the basic component in our use of language—more basic, anyway, than the text. Does the text not consist of true statements? What other access could we possibly have to the text than a route beginning with the true statement? So we tend to think. But it is in fact the other way around.

To begin with, recall that the relationship between representation and language is a purely contingent one; textual representation is just one variant of representation. So any intuitions we might have about the relationship between the text and its sentences—however plausible these might seem at first sight—could hardly be the last word about representation in general. Think, for example, of painting, where the world is represented in the complete absence of language. Or think of how the behavior of the higher animals may be influenced by representations they have of parts of their *Umwelt,* even though they lack the capacity of speech. So the fact that historical texts or novels are made up of statements should not fool us and make us believe that some linguistic logic has now completely taken over what one might call "representational logic." Instead of arguing that in the historical text and the novel language has triumphed over representation, one might just as well argue the other way around and say that representation has subjected language to *its* laws. And for the time being the latter option is all the more to be recommended since it may help us learn to question the lingualist prejudices with which we have been indoctrinated in one and a half centuries of the philosophy of language.

But much more important is the following. The true statement presents us with a world consisting of things (to be referred to by the true statement's subject term) possessing certain properties (attributed to the object of reference by the true statement's predicate term). So the simplicity and apparent priority of the statement to representation arises from the former being buttressed by a metaphysics presenting the world as consisting of things and their properties. The picture of the true statement is, therefore, by no means as simple as we tend to believe: it needs the support of a full-blown and quite ambitious metaphysics which, in its turn, draws its inspiration and plausibility in a vicious circle from that very picture of the true statement. As soon as we drop or question that metaphysics (as we should do at *some* stage if we wish to avoid dogmatism), viz. as long as we have only *aspects*, we do not have, as yet, things with their properties. The latter belong to a fundamentally *later* stage—and this is why representation is more basic than the true state-

ment (in spite of what the text seems to suggest so strongly). The regime of representation precedes that of the singular true statement, and this is why it is wrong to infer from the indisputable fact that historical representations consist of singular true statements the conclusion that the latter are more fundamental than the former from a logical point of view.

It may well be that in certain contexts we never actually get to that later stage—and that the world remains to be given to us only in terms of aspects. This is what the situation is like in historical writing. Most of the past—think of the French Revolution, the Cold War, the era of American hegemony—we know only in terms of aspects. In some cases these aspects may finally be elevated to the regime of things and their properties. But this need not happen, and in the practice of the writing of history this is only very rarely the case.

Think of the first explorers of the American continent in the early 1500s: each of them discovered only an *aspect* of the continent, but then mapmakers pulled all their individual discoveries together; only then did a new thing come into being, namely, the American continent. But suppose now that the religious wars of the sixteenth century had somehow resulted in a universal ban on transcontinental navigation; then all our knowledge of the American continent would never have outgrown knowledge in terms of aspects—a knowledge that we could get access to by consulting the books written some five centuries ago by the explorers of that time.

Our knowledge of the past and, more generally, all our "representational" knowledge of the world are to be compared with our knowledge of the American continent before the mapmakers began their work. *Aspects* are then the last word, *things* and their *properties* having not yet entered the scene. Nevertheless, under some very specific circumstances such knowledge may crystallize in the kind of knowledge we typically express in terms of the singular true statement. And we saw in the previous section how such a transition may take place and how to move from Saussure to Frege. But this will remain the exception—and when it takes place, it is the end of history. Until then representational knowledge will be all we have; we will then know the world only in terms of its aspects. But there is no reason at all to discredit that kind of knowledge—just as what we may find in the books written by those imaginary explorers of some five hundred years ago would nowadays have been very informative to us if transcontinental navigation had stopped in, say, 1530. And so it is with history. Representational (historical) knowledge deserves a place of its own alongside that of propositional truth. Even more so, representational meaning and truth may explain propositional truth and meaning; it reduces us to a stage in which the latter—and the objects about

which we can express true and meaningful statements—are not yet given to us. In sum, the account of historical representation refers us to a stage preceding the existence of individual things and of what can truly be said about them. Paradoxically, representation precedes true description.

This, then, is the "Copernican Revolution" advocated in this book.[39]

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39. I must, however, recognize Hegel as my most illustrious predecessor here. The first sentence of the *Enzyklopädie* runs as follows: "[D]ie Philosophie entbehrt des Vorteils, der den andern Wissenschaften zu gute kommt, ihre *Gegenstände,* als unmittelbar von der Erfahrung zugegeben, so wie die *Methode* des Erkennens für Anfang und und Fortgang, als bereits angenommen, *voraussetzen* zu können." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philsophischen Wissenschaften im Grundriss* (1830; repr., Hamburg, 1991), 33. The dogma presupposed by most of contemporary philosophy of language is the existence of a world of objects giving us access to propositional truth. But this dogma requires the philosopher's critical scrutiny.

CHAPTER 8

Presence

1. Introduction

For two reasons the notion of "presence" now needs to be discussed.[1] First, the etymological meaning of the word "representation" already compels us to do so: representation is a making present of, or the granting of presence (again), to something that is absent. This is what our representative assemblies do: they make the people present because the people themselves cannot

1. The term "presence" has gained currency in the last few years thanks to Hans Ulbricht Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, 2004), in which he elaborated on the notion of presence as discussed by authors such as Jean Luc Nancy, Karl Heinz Bohrer, and George Steiner. See J. L. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence,* trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford, 1993); K. H. Bohrer, *Ästhetische Negativität* (Munich, 2001); G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, 1989). He pays no attention, however, to what these authors might owe to Heidegger but relates the notion of presence to what is immediately given to us: "what is 'present' to us (very much in the sense of the Latin form *prae-esse*) is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies"(p. 17). Jonathan Culler gave a summary of what variants of presence one may think of in this context: "[A]mong the familiar concepts that depend on the value of presence are: the immediacy of sensation, the presence of ultimate truth to a divine consciousness, the effective presence of an origin in a historical development, a spontaneous or unmediated intuition, the transumption of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical synthesis, the presence in speech of logical and grammatical structures [or the reverse?], truth as what subsists behind appearances, and the effective presence of goal in the steps that lead to it. The authority of presence, its power of valorization, structures all our thinking. The notions of 'making clear,' 'grasping,' 'demonstrating,' 'revealing,' and 'showing what is the case' all invoke presence. . . . As these examples indicate, the metaphysics of presence is pervasive, familiar and powerful." See J. Culler, *On*

be present in such assemblies. A portrait may make present to the spectator somebody who has been dead for centuries. Similarly, the writing of history gives presence again to an absent past, and its very raison d'être is to do just this. The past no longer exists, but no reasonable person will doubt its importance to us, and this is why we rely on the historical text to compensate for its regrettable absence. However, this immediately raises the puzzling question of what it might mean to give presence to something that is absent; how could something possibly be present in its absence?

Second, in chapter 6 we found that representational truth consists in the presence of what is revealed or "unconcealed" (to use Heidegger's terminology) by a historical representation. It follows that the issue of presence is most intimately related to that of representational truth and that accepting the latter will oblige us to explore the former. Furthermore, we found in chapter 7 that in representation meaning precedes truth and that the meaning of any representation can be fixed only by how it relates to that of other representations. Much the same will then be true of presence as well.

Needless to say, this situation permits of two interpretations. One may argue that the representational meaning, truth, and presence that are produced by any individual representation are always codetermined by those of other representations. Call this the *individualist* interpretation. But one may also take all these other representations together into what one might refer to as the "representational system" and then say that that system determines the representational meaning, truth, and presence of any individual representation. Call this the *collectivist* interpretation. Of course, from a logical point of view both interpretations are equivalent, but the emphasis is different: in the first case the emphasis is on individual representations and in the second on the set of such representations. Nevertheless, the distinction is useful since it may help us understand where the writing of history and art do differ from each other in ways that we have hitherto been unaware of. In the case of art the individualist option is certainly to be preferred, since the notion of the representational system is far weaker there than in the writing of history. Observe that with regard to individual works of art the question, But

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Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (London, 1985), 93, 94. The funny thing is that a no less impressive list can be drawn up of theories attacking presence as an illusion: the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical facts, hermeneutics, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, neohistoricism, and so on. Gumbrecht must be praised for his courage to rehabilitate presence, as he understands that term (though it is to be regretted that he did not bother to give much of an argument in favor of his views). Anyway, I shall not discuss Gumbrecht's views—nor the even more interesting theory on presence recently proposed by Eelco Runia. Runia is critical of relating presence to representation though without giving an argument for this view, if I am not mistaken.

is it art? (hence part of the system) is by no means idle or meaningless—as was the case, for example, with Duchamp's ready-mades and Warhol's Brillo boxes. Such individual works of art may indeed succeed in transforming the nature of the representational system of art itself and what we are prepared to call art. But no such thing will ever occur in historical writing (or at least only very rarely).[2] So whereas the representational system of the arts may be called individualist, that of the writing of history is solidly and unambiguously collectivist, or *holistic.*

This must have its consequences for representational truth and thus for presence as well. More specifically, the presence effected by representational truth is not to be related to individual representations, in the way propositional truth or falsity can always be attributed to individual assertions. Presence is therefore something achieved collectively by all the representations there are and could possibly be. Consequently, it can be attributed only to all historical writing or to quite substantial subdivisions of it. Of individual representations one can say, at most, that they *participate* in representational truth and that their presence will reflect to what extent this is the case. I hasten to warn, however, against a misunderstanding that my use of the term "participation" might give rise to. If a representation participates in representational truth, it will certainly not do so at the expense of others. In fact, it is the reverse: participation rather has the character of adding to the total capital of participation, so that the participation in representational truth of one representation will increase that total capital and hence that of other individual representations as well. Put differently, there is not an amount of representational truth whose size could be fixed beforehand, but it may increase indefinitely with the number of representations of good quality.

2. Presence and Representation: Texts

Etymology already requires us to relate presence to representation. For representation literally means to make something *present* again or, to be more exact, to make something *present* that presently is *absent.* So the notion of representation somehow ties together the ideas of presence and absence. This should awaken our interest because these two notions clearly exclude each other. And when representation pulls them together, this is not equivalent to

2. At present I can think of just one example, namely, Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1992), in which Schama tried to introduce the discourse of the modernist novel into historical writing. The experiment was not very successful, and it is telling that the book never served as a model for later historians.

painting something black that used to be white. That is unproblematic, of course. But saying that something may be present in its absence is paradoxical, if not outright contradictory, since things cannot be both at the same time. So why should the concept of representation deliberately provoke this open confrontation between presence and absence—and how could it possibly survive semantic suicide when doing so? More specifically, what could it possibly mean to make present again that which is absent? How can we say of something that is absent that it has been made present again, or that something is present in its absence—or, inversely, that it is absent in its presence?

Saying that something can be present in its absence, should be equivalent to saying that something may be absent in its presence, suggests a certain symmetry in the kind of philosophical problems occasioned by presence and absence. But the suggestion is wrong. For it is presence rather than absence that is the real troublemaker. Think of the three paradigmatic cases of representation: aesthetic representation, political representation, and historical representation. In each of these three cases the meaning of the term "absence" is fairly straightforward. The sitter for a portrait is clearly absent, for example; furthermore, it is clear what we mean when we say that the electorate itself is absent when its representatives assemble in our legislative bodies and that the past is absent when historians set themselves to their work. But what could it possibly mean to say that, after all, the sitter for the portrait, the electorate, and the past are somehow present in such cases? That's not an easy question to answer. So it need not surprise us that this chapter will elaborate more about presence than about absence.

In the preceding chapters we found that there are two theories of representation, the resemblance theory and the substitution theory. So what can be said about presence from the perspective of these two? According to the resemblance theory, a representation should resemble what it represents. It would then follow as a matter of course that satisfying the criteria for resemblance will also give us presence. Thus a representation has presence if it resembles what it represents. But this seems to miss what we intuitively associate with presence: if something possesses presence, does this not suggest that we are deeply fascinated by it and that it clearly stands out against other more pedestrian objects in its surroundings? And it seems unlikely that mere resemblance might succeed in achieving this. Think of the photos of politicians in our newspapers: there is not much "auratic" about mere resemblance.[3] Two options are now open to us. We can conclude from the

3. I'm using the word "auratic" here in agreement with Benjamin's well-known essay on the work of art in the era of its technical reproducibility. It would certainly pay to investigate more closely the relationship between Benjamin's notions of aura and presence.

resemblance theory's incapacity to explain presence that the notion makes no sense. And that would mean an untimely end of our quest for presence.

The other option—to be preferred at this stage—is that we had better try our luck now with the substitution theory. According to this theory, a representation represents a represented if it can function as a *substitute* for the represented. In contrast to the resemblance theory, the substitution theory throws one promising insight into our lap right away. When discussing representation in chapter 4, we found that a representation and what it represents have the same ontological status. The resemblance theory has a pronounced epistemological bias, whereas the substitution theory insists on the ontological equivalence of a representation and what is represented by it, though it is worthwhile to warn here against a dangerous ambiguity in the meaning of representation. We can say that a house represents the value of a certain sum of money, but the sum of money does not represent the house as meant by the substitution theory. Unlike a picture of the house, the money cannot function as a *substitute* for the house. And the explanation is that in the function "a represents b" the variable b has a much greater range of values in the case of the money than in that of the picture. In the former case b may stand for a house, an expensive car, work of art, or for a certain portfolio of stocks and so on. Whereas in the latter the range of the variable is restricted to the house in question. Put differently, in the latter case there is an ontological contiguity absent from the former. Granting to painting and sculptures the status of ontological contiguity with the things represented by them does not yet sound too provocative. More surprising however, is that the ontological pull of representation can be so strong that it even succeeds in pulling certain uses of language over the gap ordinarily separating language and the world. Think of historical representation. We have historical texts—historical representations—in order to compensate for an absent past; if the past were as real to us as trees and houses, we would not need them. But, again, since representations (whether linguistic or not) are things, these texts will acquire the same ontological status as the past itself. Texts are things.[4] Language and the world—normally kept apart by the view that we use language for expressing truth, whereas the latter is what truth is true of—intermingle with each other in the case of the text. To put it metaphorically, the absent past creates so strong an ontological vacuum that historical language is sucked into the vacuum and becomes part of the ontological domain of trees and houses.

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4. For a diagram depicting this fact about texts, see my *History and Tropology* (Berkeley, 1994), 90. The issue was discussed in chapter 6. See also my *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), 11–13, 81, 82, 236, 237. And, of course, the argument has been made several times in this book.

From the perspective of our quest for presence, this undoubtedly is an interesting fact. For if representational language has an ontological status that is absent in its nonrepresentational uses, it seems natural to discover in this the text's presence. For this is where it so conspicuously differs from single sentences or scientific theories lacking any ontological status themselves. Language acquires in the text the aura that we will readily attribute to works of art, which we also see as unique things. So who would hesitate any longer to speak of the "presence effects" of historical (or poetic) language on the basis of these considerations?[5]

Certainly the historian may rejoice in this (or not, of course, if he or she prefers to believe that history is a science). But if we have to answer the question of the relationship between the notions of representation and presence, this argument about the ontological status of (historical) texts will make us none the wiser. Admittedly, the argument itself is of some interest. But what follows from it is not. For including historical texts in the set of works of art (all possessing the kind of presence we grant to the things making up the world's inventory) is disappointing for two reasons. In the first place, saying that works of art are on that inventory is a platitude without any interest. In the second place, arguing that works of art (along with historical texts) may have presence because they are on that inventory results in such an extremely "democratic" distribution of having the property of presence that must rob the notion of all meaning and significance. So this exploration has remained fruitless.

3. Presence Is a Supervenient Property

Let's return therefore to the substitution theory. We should primarily think here, of course, of one thing (the representation) taking the place of or being exchanged for another (what is represented by the representation). And this suggests a picture of what representation ideally is like. For let us for a moment take seriously Leibniz's talk of the identity of indistinguishables, hence the idea that we could have two specimens of a certain type of thing, say T_1 and T_2, that are completely indistinguishable. The substitution theory then seems to suggest that T_2 is T_1's best representation—and vice versa. But this would involve us in an absurdity. For if T_2 is T_1's best representation and T_2 and T_1 are indiscernible, it would follow that we must hold that T_1 is T_1's best representation. But this is at odds with the definition of representation

5. When opposing poetry to the language of the historian and the philosopher, Sir Philip Sidney famously wrote, "[T]he poet yields to the power of the mind an image of that whereof (the other two) bestow but a wordish description."

as the exchange of one thing (a represented) by *another* thing (its representation). So the substitution theory entails a conception of what representation ideally looks like that conflicts with how it defines representation.

Now one of the (many) good things about presence is that it may help us out of this unpleasant impasse. Suppose we have a landscape and a painting of that landscape. In whatever way we define the notion of presence, it cannot possibly be doubted that we will apply this definition in a different way to either the landscape or its representation. What grants presence to a landscape will differ from what grants presence to a painting of that landscape. For example, the landscape depicted by Karel Dujardin in his seventeenth-century painting *Le Diamant*—supposing the landscape to be real—is without much interest; in fact, it is decidedly dull with its long, straight, and bare slope in the background.[6] Yet Dujardin's tiny painting of only 20.5 by 27 centimeters possesses an almost explosive presence rivaling that of some of Jacob van Ruisdael's most majestic canvases. Even a large wall in a museum will be crushed, as it were, by the painting's sheer presence if we hang it there as the only item exhibited. Still more telling is sculpture. Think of all the representations of the human figure, male and female, that have been made—from Donatello and Michelangelo down to Rodin and Moore. Many of these sculptures have a truly overwhelming presence, outweighing by far that of the individuals who were presumably used as models and whom we would probably not look at twice if we happened to encounter them in real life.[7] Taking into account these indubitable facts about aesthetic representation, we come to appreciate the asymmetry of presence: our readiness to ascribe presence to representations exceeds by far the amount of presence we are willing to grant to what they represent. Apparently presence is a quality of the representation rather than of what it represents.

This observation may help us out of the impasse of the substitution theory we encountered earlier. This impasse originated from a conflict apparently inherent in the theory. On the one hand the substitution theory seemed to require the obliteration of all differences between the represented and its representation, ultimately giving way to their being completely *identical,* whereas on the other hand it compelled us to uphold that the represented and its rep-

6. The painting is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK.

7. Obviously, if the human figure is represented naked, this will substantially add to its presence by stimulating erotic desire. The mechanism has been exploited to the full in the history of art. In terms of presence, paintings of naked men and women automatically have an advantage over their rivals depicting less attractive things. All the more reason to admire the courage of painters like Rembrandt in depicting naked women without relying on the all too easy trick of provoking erotic desire. This exemplifies tact, respect, subtlety, and true humanism.

resentation are *different* from each other. But the notion of presence will make all the difference here, in the true sense of that expression. For rather than being one of a representation's constitutive features, presence is something we ascribe or grant to the representation. Presence comes from the outside; it is a kind of compliment we pay to a representation—of course on the condition that it possesses certain qualities itself. So it may well be that there are few or even no material differences between a represented and its representation so that they ultimately *are* truly identical—and yet this need no longer involve the substitution theory in any problems. For the asymmetry between the represented and its representation due to the preference of presence to attach itself to the latter will be sufficient to distinguish between the representation and the represented even if the two of them are materially completely identical. One is reminded here of Arthur Danto's well-known argument about Warhol's Brillo boxes, which one could rephrase by saying that the box possesses a presence that its counterparts in a grocery store lack—even though there are no discernible differences between them.

The substitution theory got into difficulties because of its uncertainty about whether a represented and its representation should, ideally, be identical—but the notion of presence helps us out of them by making clear that there *is* such a difference after all even if the two are identical. Moreover, presence may explain why and how we got into this impasse at all. We believed, initially, that material similarity or difference was decisive. And, indeed, as long as we have only material similarity or difference in mind, the substitution theory will be in trouble. However, as soon as we see that presence is a supervenient property, something that we may *ascribe* to representations (or not, of course), we will recognize that material similarity or difference is irrelevant here.

Nevertheless, there is something odd about all this. For we may well ask ourselves, If presence is something ascribed to representations, if it attaches itself to representations rather than to what they represent, if it therefore seems to come from somewhere outside the interaction between a representation and what it represents, what then is its source?

Let me put it this way. Initially we will be inclined to relate presence to the being present to us of the things in the world, or their *Vorhanden-sein,* to use Heideggerian jargon. The presence of the chair on which I am now sitting and that of the keyboard on which I am writing this chapter seem to be the prototypical examples of presence. What could be more present to us, in the sense meant here, than these kinds of things?[8] And yet we decided

8. This probably is what Gumbrecht had in mind in his discussion of presence.

above in favor of the profoundly anti-Platonic position that representations are typically more present than what they represent. So where does this presence come from if what is represented, if reality itself, does not endow it with its credentials? Could there be anything that is more real and more present than even reality itself? And if so, what is this anything and where should we locate it?

4. Nietzsche on Tragedy

Having arrived at this stage, I propose to consider what undoubtedly is the *locus classicus* of the notion of representation, that is, Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie.* When commenting on that book, Arthur Danto discusses

> that sort of magical re-presentation paradigmatically exemplified in the Dionysian rites characterized by Nietzsche, where the god is actually invoked into re-presence by the appropriate religious technology. Each appearance of the god resembles each other, and an imitational representation of the god's appearing resembles this again, except that in this instance the epiphany is denoted by the tragic structures. And so again if statues of kings and gods were originally set up in the spirit of making the king or god present wherever this form was present—the statue would have to be believed to resemble what was believed to be the king or god re-presented. And when this magical relationship of complex identity was dissolved, and statues were interpreted merely as representations of the gods and kings, they did not have to undergo change in form to undergo change in semantic function. . . . All I wish to stress at this point is that what *we* would call statues, gravures, rites, and the like, underwent a transformation from being simply part of reality, itself magically structured by virtue of the fact that special things, regarded as possessing special powers, were capable of multiple representations, into things that *contrasted* with reality, standing outside and against it, so to speak, as if reality underwent a corresponding transformation in which it lost its magic in men's eyes. Artworks became the sort of representation we now regard language as being, though even language—words—once formed a magical part of reality and participated in the substance of things we would now say merely form part of their extensions.[9]

9. A. C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 76, 77

Danto's complex argument is, in fact, an argument about the origin of the work of art and its ontological status. The idea is, roughly, as follows. In Greek antiquity, at the time when Sophocles and Aeschylus gave birth to tragedy, gods and kings were believed to be present themselves in the artworks representing them, regardless of whether these artworks were tragedies, statues, or rites; and this endowed these artworks with their unique presence. At a later stage, however, these works of art lost this presence, and gods and kings were now separated from their representations. And in this way the work of art came into being as we presently conceive of it.

However, as Danto emphasizes at the end of the quote, this is only part of the story. For something of the work of art's former presence was preserved after all. This presence was now attributed to the category of works of art *as such:* works of art were granted an ontological status of their own, setting them, as a specific category of objects, apart from the more pedestrian objects in our world, such as trees, houses, and Brillo boxes that are still on grocery shelves. Danto perceives here a parallel with the fate of language. Just like art, language began by being part of a magical reality. But then, in some crucial phase in human history, it emancipated itself from that magical reality. It now lost its previous magical features, but in return it ruled supreme in its self-created domain of the symbolic order and made possible the miracles of human communication of science and the arts. Two new domains came into being in opposition to reality—namely, the domains of language and works of art.[10]

Danto presents all this, more or less, as a just-so story and refrains from a discussion of how Nietzsche arrived at these insights and whether they are valid. This is a pity, for it will now not be easy to infer a theory on presence from his account of representation. But let us grant him that the idols of the gods did originally have a presence that they borrowed from the gods themselves, in much the same way that, according to Hans Belting, Byzantine icons were believed to participate in the gods' essence on the basis of some (neo-)

10. An interesting parallel is to be found in Gumbrecht's discussion of the meaning of the transsubstantation. Gumbrecht argues that the word *est* in *hoc est corpus meum* was originally taken literally, whereas since the Reformation the word has been read as "standing for." See Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 29. We may observe here a shift from the magical to a representational use of language. Aquino combined both positions in his view of the transsubstantation: "[I]n der *Summa Theologiae* beantwortet er (Thomas v. A.) gleich eingangs die Frage nach der rechten Benennung des Sakraments mit der schon geläufigen Unterscheidung: Opfergabe (*hostia*) heisse es insofern, als es Christus selbst enthälte, *sacrificium* hingegen, sofern es in Sonderheit das Leiden Christi 'repräsentiere.'" See H. Hoffmann, *Repräsentation. Studien zur Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte von der Antike bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1974), 65ff.

Platonic assumption.[11] But when art moved to the symbolic order, what happened to presence? Did the idol retain its presence? If not, if presence got lost, there is no longer any presence at all to be in need of clarification. If idols did retain it, it was clearly not because the gods were still present in these idols. For that was part of a previous dispensation. Presumably they retained their presence merely because they depicted such lofty entities as the gods? But in that case the real home of presence is the god himself and not his depiction or representation. The idol then may only *remind* the believer of the god and of the (divine) presence attributed to him; but even the most miserable and presence-less icon or painting could succeed in doing just this. Recall, moreover, that Danto insists on the parallelism of art and language when they move into the symbolic order. Again, we may infer from this the (mildly) surprising claim that in certain cases language may acquire the same ontological status as things—which I have already argued for in this book on several occasions, for example, by claiming that part of the original mythical character of *langue* was retained, or transfigured, into an ontological category with its moving into the symbolic order.[12] But again, as we found at the end of section 2, this gives us desperately little to go on in explaining presence: saying that *all* of language has presence is tantamount to saying that *none* of it has.

So while deploring Danto's somewhat lackadaisical attitude at this stage of his argument, we'd now best take a closer look at Nietzsche's firstborn itself. We will then find that the Schopenhauerian inspiration of Nietzsche's argument may help us out of our present impasse. In order to grasp Nietzsche's argument, we should start by focusing on what he writes on the role of the chorus in the tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus. Here he opposes the view of Schlegel to that of Schiller. According to Friedrich Schlegel, the chorus is meant to destroy the barrier between the spectator and the scene.[13] As a

11. H. Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990).

12. Danto does not distinguish between the representational and the nonrepresentational use of language as I do in this chapter (and in all of this book), and in the correspondence I had with him about this issue he argued that *all* language is representational. So an argument as given in section 2 for the ontological status of representational language would be alien to Danto's own position.

13. This seems to have been the situation in the Middle Ages, when actors and the spectators of a play still shared the same reality. When discussing medieval manuscripts indicating how actors should behave, Gumbrecht comments: "[W]hat the manuscripts then again concentrate upon . . . is the exit or the farewell of the actors. In other words, the manuscripts provided a path for the undoing of the primary 'theatrical' situation—in which the actors' bodies were not separated, by a curtain, from the bodies of the spectators, and in which it was clearly not the function of the actors' bodies to produce a complex meaning that the spectators were supposed to inductively decipher." Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence,* 31. For this interplay of everyday reality with theatrical reality and the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi,* see my *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, 2005)270–272.

result, what happens on the scene becomes part of the spectator's own reality; the tragedy is no longer merely a representation of some story—no, the gods, kings, and heroes are now as real as anything else in the spectator's reality. They are now really there *themselves.* As Schlegel put it himself, the tragedy is *leibhaft empirisch,* and not merely an *aesthetic* phenomenon.[14] But Nietzsche prefers Schiller, "when he considered it to be a living wall which tragedy draws about itself in order to shut itself off in purity from the real world and to preserve its ideal ground and its poetic freedom."[15]

To reformulate it all in terms of a famous argument of Meyer Schapiro (and of Derrida), the chorus is like the picture frame isolating a pictorial reality from our normal reality.[16] Like the picture frame the chorus warns us that we are now entering a *new* reality, different from our own, but no less real for that. Now everything depends, of course, on what exactly Nietzsche may mean by this notion of a new or extra reality making itself felt in the tragedy. Is this a mere manner of speaking, as when we say that marriage, a new job, or retirement made us enter a new reality? Or is this phrase meant to be taken literally? And if so, what could it possibly mean? For reality is not the kind of thing that easily lends itself to reckless multiplication, as we know since Ockham. Does not reality by definition exclude everything outside itself, such as other realities? But if we go on reading Nietzsche, we shall observe that he really has the courage of his opinions and requires us to take literally his talk about a new or extra reality. This becomes clear if we take into account the following passage:

> Perhaps it will serve as a starting-point for thinking about this if I now assert that the satyr, the fictitious creature of nature, bears the same relation to the cultured human being as Dionysiac music bears to civilization. Of the latter Richard Wagner has said that it is absorbed, elevated, and extinguished (*aufgehoben*) by music, just as lamplight is superseded by the light of day. I believe that, when faced with the chorus of satyrs, cultured Greeks felt themselves absorbed, elevated, and extinguished in exactly the same way. This is the first effect of Dionysiac tragedy: state

14. F. Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus," in *Werke I* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 45; F. Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings,* ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1999), 37.

15. Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus," 38. On page 42, however, he reverses again his assessment of Schlegel and Schiller.

16. M. Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 224, 225. Derrida rolled Schapiro's argument out into a whole book: see J. Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris, 1986).

> and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the hearth of nature.[17]

This is a very illuminating passage, which brings us to the heart of the issue. For what Nietzsche does here is introduce, indeed, a new reality while at the same time explaining how this new reality is related to reality proper. Most suggestive here is Wagner's comparison of lamplight to daylight—where tragic reality is analogous to daylight and our own reality to lamplight. Our own reality is taken out of tragic reality; it is a mere reflection, so to speak, of the latter, which can give us access only to "the unvarnished expression of truth."[18]

5. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and the Sublime

Now we may ask ourselves again what leads—and justifies—Nietzsche to utter such bold assertions? This brings us to Nietzsche's (and Wagner's) Schopenhauerian inspiration. As we all know, Schopenhauer took Kant's distinction between noumenal and phenomenal reality as his point of departure—with its implication that we can have no knowledge of the *Ding an sich*. But, as Richard Rorty once cynically observed, philosophers can never resist for long the urge to "eff the ineffable." And so it was with Schopenhauer. His argument was that the human mind is Janus-faced: when it looks *outside,* it will perceive Kantian phenomenal reality, but when it looks *inside,* it will get an inkling of the noumenon. So the noumenon is not to be found somewhere behind the things of the world—which is, more or less, the picture suggested by Kant's critical philosophy itself—but in our inner selves. And what we will dimly perceive if we look into the depths of ourselves is some primeval, universal, and all-encompassing drive that Schopenhauer calls "the Will." Phenomenal reality is a transcendental objectification of the Schopenhauerian Will.

But whereas Kant proposes his categories of the understanding for this transcendental objectification, Schopenhauer instead presents his notion of the *principium individuationis.* That is to say, the noumenal Will precedes the world's consisting of individual things; for this partitioning of noumenal reality into individual things is achieved by the *principium individuationis.* Finally, just like Kant, Schopenhauer argues that noumenal reality cannot be

17. Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus," 39.
18. Ibid., 41.

an object of experience or of knowledge. There is, however, one exception, and this is art—more specifically, music.[19] Schopenhauer is somewhat unclear about whether music is a manifestation of the noumenal Will itself or merely a picture or representation of the Will, its *Abbild,* as he calls it. But let's not press this further. The main insight here is that in art, and above all in music, something of the transcendental Will can be perceived—and that this is what grants to art and music their presence, to put it in the right terminology.[20]

Now a great many things will become clear. To begin with, we can now understand what exactly Nietzsche had in mind when opposing the Dionysian and the Apollonian to each other and why he so much emphasized the Dionysian character of tragedy: tragedy and the Dionysian express a reminiscence of noumenal reality and may hence reveal to us truths more profound and universal than anything that (rational) reflection on our reality can produce. That reflection can only yield mere Apollonian truths. Second, we now also understand why Socrates is no less important in Nietzsche's story than in the one Hegel had told us in the famous section from his lectures on the philosophy of history entitled "Das Verderben der Griechischen Sittlichkeit" (which undoubtedly was in Nietzsche's mind when writing *Die Geburt der Tragödie*).[21] In both cases rational reflection—that is, Socrates—destroyed the Greek's previous susceptibility to the profound truths expressed by tragedy for which neither Socrates nor Plato ever showed any interest, as Nietzsche perceptively points out. Tragic truth had become an old-fashioned relic with the Socratic enlightenment.

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19. As Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer, "As a result of all this, we can regard the phenomenal world, or nature, and music as two different expressions of the same thing; and this thing itself is therefore the only medium of their analogy, a knowledge of which is required if we are to understand that analogy. Accordingly, music, if regarded as an expression of the world, is in the highest degree a universal language that is related to the universality of concepts much as these are related to the particular things. . . . For, as we have said, music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more exactly, of the will's adequate objectivity, but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon." Ibid., 77–78.

20. Nietzsche uses Kantian terminology himself when he says that the revelations of art provide the common ground to "the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the entire world of phenomena." See ibid., 41.

21. Nietzsche substantially elaborates on Hegel's account by what he does with the Oedipus motif. Nietzsche casts Oedipus in the role that Hegel had given to Socrates—that of the world historical individual whose terrible fate is caused by his supreme wisdom. Speaking about Oedipus, Nietzsche writes, "Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us, and Dionysiac wisdom in particular, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature." Ibid., 48.

Of course there are differences between Hegel and Nietzsche as well. For Hegel welcomed Socrates's intervention as the entry into a new world, whereas Nietzsche deeply regretted what Socrates had now irrevocably condemned to the past, though this dimension of an irreparable loss is present in Hegel as well.[22] Next, whereas Hegel focuses on Socrates exclusively, Nietzsche pours most of his scorn on Euripides for having robbed tragedy of its sublimity by irresponsibly rationalizing it. We will now also grasp the point of Nietzsche's phrase about how "the tragic work of art of the Greeks was truly born from the spirit of music."[23] The idea is not that the Greeks had started with the discovery of music and had then moved on to tragedy; rather, tragedy shared with music this Dionysian power to offer *universalia ante rem* instead of mere *universalia post rem* or *in re.* Last, the subtitle of Nietzsche's book—*Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus*—now need no longer puzzle us. It was Schopenhauerian pessimism that had made Nietzsche susceptible to the darker and tragic aspects of Greek culture, to which Johann Winckelmann's Apollonian tradition had always remained so completely insensitive.

But there is one other issue that I would like to discuss at greater length. Recall Schopenhauer's exchange of the Kantian categories of the understanding for the *principium individuationis.* The implication is that Dionysian tragedy tends to do away with what makes individuals into individuals: it really dissolves the contours of our selves. What is then at stake had already been formulated some eighty years before Nietzsche by Hölderlin. In the so-called metric version of his novel *Hyperion* Hölderlin introduces the "wise man," in all likelihood modeled on Rousseau, whom Hölderlin deeply admired. This wise man tells Hyperion a story about the origins of mankind that has some striking parallels with Nietzsche's historicization of Schopenhauer's transcendentalism.

The wise man begins by expounding how man descended from heaven—where heaven is, in fact, an idealized version of Schopenhauer's reality in which the *principium individuationis* has not yet made its entry. After our fall from heaven we became our individual selves. From then on we will be the perennial battleground between two desires mutually excluding each other. On the one hand we feel the desire to undo the workings of the *principium individuationis;* this Dionysian dissolution of our identity seems to promise a return to heaven or at least to open our eyes again to the forgotten truths

22. See my *Sublime Historical Experience,* chap. 8.

23. Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus," 81.

of tragedy. But on the other hand, we rather like these chains that the *principium individuationis* has forged for us. They make us into who we are—so when we get rid of them, we get rid of ourselves as well—*and this is death,* as Hölderlin most cogently points out.[24] Beiser sees here not only the essence of Hölderlin's philosophy of human being but also a theory of history, since within Hölderlin's organicist conception, this is what history is all about.[25]

Now this being pulled in two opposite and mutually exclusive directions—the return to heaven on the one hand and utter destruction on the other—is the hallmark of the sublime and of sublime experience. The sublime announces itself when an irreconcilable conflict has arisen between the categories that we normally rely upon in order to make sense of (phenomenal) reality. It need not surprise us, therefore, that Nietzsche implicitly relates Dionysian tragedy to the sublime. He emphasizes how suffering (*Leiden*) and pleasure (*Lust*) may paradoxically go together in the encounter with tragedy: "He (i.e. the spectator) shivers in horror at the sufferings which will befall the hero, and yet they give him a premonition of a higher, far more overwhelming delight. He sees more and deeper than ever before, and yet he wishes he were blind. Where are we to find the origin of this wondrous self-division, this breaking and bending-back of the point of Apollo, if not in *Dionysiac* magic . . . ?"[26]

Obviously, this is the kind of conflict that is central to the sublime. And elsewhere Nietzsche is even quite explicit about this relationship with the sublime when characterizing the satyrs of the tragic chorus as "something sublime and divine" and when saying that in tragedy we encounter "the *sublime,* whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means."[27]

So in agreement with Nietzsche's argument, I propose to consider presence as an aspect or manifestation of the sublime. This proposal firmly situates presence in the domain of aesthetics and especially in that part of aesthetics where it may proudly claim its superiority to other philosophical subdisciplines. For, as I have argued elsewhere,[28] the paradoxes typical of the sublime move us to a perspective from which we can objectify epistemology and all that has been achieved by philosophers since Descartes and Kant in the name

24. The former urge is to be related to Spinoza and the latter to Fichte—Hölderlin's main sources of philosophical inspiration at the time of his writing *Hyperion.*

25. F. C. Beiser, *German Idealism. The Struggle against Subjectivism* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 404, 405.

26. Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus," 104–105 (original emphasis).

27. Ibid., 40–41 (original emphasis).

28. See my *Sublime Historical Experience,* 337, 338.

of epistemology. The logical space of epistemological discussion is a creation of the sublime, since in this space meaning can be given to what is excluded as self-contradictory in epistemology itself. In this way the sublime can be said to precede and transcend epistemology and epistemological categories such as that of the subject/object opposition. Not what epistemologists say but the perspective from which they say it refers us to the sublime.

6. Conclusion: Presence and the Sublime

One last feature of presence can be derived from this. The obvious question to ask now is how the sublime can escape unscathed the paradoxes on which every epistemology would founder ignominiously. The explanation is that these paradoxes always originate from descriptions of the state of the subject; something may happen to someone causing in him or her feelings of both delight and pain or horror. This is Burke's conception of the sublime based on Locke's theory of sensation, where the experience of the sublime consists in a going together of feelings of delight and pain that otherwise mutually exclude each other.[29] And then, indeed, some of these states of the subject would *ex hypothesi* either logically or empirically exclude each other. This is the kind of question that traditionally preoccupied epistemologists—though, of course, emotions such as pain and pleasure rarely entered their analyses, undoubtedly because emotions are a notoriously difficult subject to handle with precision and with the required logical rigor. So that is why epistemologists preferably focused on knowledge and on how experience might cause the subject to be in certain "sentential states," to use the epistemologist's jargon. But whether we deal with emotional states or with these sentential states, it is always *states of the subject* that we are talking about. And then the epistemological problem concerns the relationship between the object (or the world) and the object (or between the object on the one hand and the language used by the subject for expressing his experience or knowledge of the object on the other).

But we get a wholly different picture if the notions of subject and object are relegated to the background and if the notion of experience becomes the only agent on the philosopher's scene that truly counts. For then these paradoxes or contradictions in which the sublime involves us will disappear.

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29. Objects provoking in us an experience of the sublime "are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all passions." See E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757; repr., Oxford, 1992), 123.

The explanation is that experience sui generis cannot be related to paradox or contradiction, not so much because our experiences are of a piece, so to speak—though that may be true as well—but because experiences as such have no meaning. Meaning comes into being only when the experience is that of a certain subject and if the subject starts to articulate what having this experience means or has meant to him or her. If, then, experiences have no meaning, contradiction is impossible, since contradiction always requires meaning.

What sublime experience effects could be expressed by the following simile: think of a prism by which white light is broken into different colors from red to blue. It is much the same with the sublime, where white light is to be seen as analogous to sublime experience itself and where the light of different colors leaving the prism is analogous to the language we use for expressing experience and knowledge. The prism then separates the sublime and sublime experience on the one hand from meaning and experience, which have adapted themselves to the categories of meaning on the other. To continue this metaphor, sublime experience moves us upwards from the colors leaving the prism to that of the white light entering it and where the mutual exclusion of red and blue light has not yet announced itself. White light precedes the phase of the contradiction between "this is red" and "this is not red (but blue)" exclusively belonging to the light that leaves the prism (and where "this" refers to all the light leaving the prism).[30] And so it is with experience: sublime experience is like the white light entering the prism, whereas normal experience and the language defining it are like the light leaving it.[31]

In agreement with this, I would propose to relate the notion of presence to that of the sublime. Two consequences follow from this. First, it will now be clear that representational truth, as discussed in chapter 6, has its ultimate ground in the sublime. In the next chapter we shall see that the sublimity of the past announces itself in the emergence of historical awareness (and, subsequently, of the discipline of the writing of history), whereas its role is only quite marginal—though not wholly zero—when our relationship to the past is forced within the matrix of the writing of history. Second, sublimity is an aspect of how we relate to the world, of how we experience it. Hence our discussion of presence in this chapter puts on the agenda the issue of our experience of the past. Experience is therefore the topic of the next chapter.

30. See Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience,* 268–271, 285, 345, 346.

31. This is an anticipation of my argument on synesthesia in chapter 10, sections 3–5.

CHAPTER 9

Experience (I)

1. Introduction

As far as I know, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) has until now been the only theorist of historical writing to take seriously the notion of historical experience.[1] This is not surprising, since there seems to be near-unanimous agreement that the experience of the past is of no use for a proper explanation of historical writing and of how it came into being. Or, to be more precise, all that the existing philosophy of history has on offer is a theory *denying* that there could be such a thing as an experience of the past at all. A long line of so-called constructivist philosophers of history—such as J. G. Droysen, M. Oakeshott, J. W. Meiland, L. J. Goldstein, and A. Tucker—argued that the historian can never properly be said to have an experience of the past itself[2] for the simple but decisive reason that the past no longer exists. As they go on to say, *experience* in the proper sense of the word is pos-

1. The account of Huizinga's theory of historical experience in this chapter and the next differs substantially from the one given in my *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, 2005) .

2. J. G. Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über der Enzyklopedie und Methodologie der Geschichte* (1857; repr., Munich, 1971; M. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933); J. W. Meiland, *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge* (New York, 1965); L. J. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (London, 1976); A. Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge, 2004). See also *History and Theory. Beiheft* 16 (1977).

sible only of what is given to us in the here and now. They immediately add, however, that this certainly does not imply that we could not have reliable *knowledge* of what is not given to us as an object of experience in the proper sense of the word.[3]

According to them, all that is offered to the historian in the range of experience is an experience of the *evidence* that the past has left to us—and that is, indeed, given to us in the here and now. Next, on the basis of this evidence the historian's purpose is to construct—hence the term "constructivism"—as plausible an account of the past as possible. Rational discussion of the relative plausibility of such constructions will always be possible, and in this way historians succeed in getting ever and ever nearer to the truth about the past.

But, again, they can never test their constructions against the data of an experience of the past *itself.* The truly decisive question in the writing of history always is which historical representation most successfully accounts for the evidence we presently have. That is to say, we can compare representations only to each other and never to the past itself. So, paradoxically, the past itself is never an ingredient in the production of historical knowledge—that honor can be granted only to the historical evidence that we presently have at our disposal.

In sum, the most plausible construction of the past, as based on existing evidence given to us in the here and now, not only is the best we can hope for but is also enough. Historical constructivism leaves no room for an experience of the past itself but sees in this no ground for despair about the scientific rationality of the writing of history.

I can agree with the constructivist thesis but shall nevertheless argue in this chapter and the next—with Huizinga—that in opposition to the constructivist argument it is possible to make sense of the notion of historical experience. Moreover, doing so may shed new light on two issues that have little or nothing to do with each other. In the first place the notion may contribute to a better understanding of our awareness of the past—hence of the question why part of our existentialist relationship with the world is the conviction that there actually is such a thing as the past at all. That will be the topic of the present chapter. In the next chapter we shall investigate in what way the notion of historical experience will require us to rethink the relationship between language and experience. Whereas in most theories of experience—the postpositivist approach to science being a good example—

3. Much of knowledge in the sciences is not, or only questionably, reducible to the experience of empirical data given to us here and now.

experience is relatively defenseless against the imperialism of language, historical experience reasserts its rights against language. In those theories language precedes experience, but in historical experience, experience precedes language. Synesthesia will be shown to be historical experience's main weapon in its struggle with language's imperialism.

2. Collectivist and Individualist (Sublime) Historical Experience

In the introduction to the previous chapter I distinguished between an individualist and a collectivist or holistic approach to the notion of presence. The former corresponds to artistic representation and the latter to historical representation. We arrived at that distinction because art compels us to focus above all on the *individual* works of art, whereas we found in chapter 7 that the representionalist truth and meaning of individual historical representations will reveal themselves only against the background of the collectivity of all historical representations. Art is individualist, and historical writing is basically collectivist or holistic; this why the latter can properly be said to be a discipline, whereas art cannot.

The difference between artistic and historical representation is that there is a dimension of "normativity" to the latter that is absent from the former: describing a certain text as a historical representation implies that it satisfies certain normative conventions. But in art no object can be denied out of hand the status of being a work of art on the grounds that it fails to satisfy certain aesthetic conventions.[4] The history of art could even be defined as the continuous and sustained attack on those conventions, culminating in their very evaporation in the course of the twentieth century. Moreover, in art the question whether some object may count as a work of art will greatly enhance its interest, whereas in historical writing the situation ordinarily is the reverse. Challenging the conventions of historical writing only rarely results in great and innovative historical writing. Next, in art imitation by others is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a successful challenge to existing conventions. One can be an artistic genius but have no followers at all. Who would believe Barnett Newman's "zips," Mark Rothko's painted square surfaces, or Jaspar Johns's flags to be a *ktèma eis aei* in the history of art? In historical writing, however, conventions are successfully

4. Danto argued in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1983) that the simplest commonplace objects can be transfigured into works of art.

challenged only when the attempt to do so has proved to be such a *ktèma eis aei* to be passed on from one generation of historians to the next. Finally, most of the interest of the work of art lies in its being an expression of the artist's experience of the world. On the contrary, in history the historian's personal experience of the past is ordinarily regarded with the greatest suspicion.[5] Though it is grudgingly granted that some of the greatest historical texts originated from such an experience. Think of a Tocqueville, Michelet, Burckhardt or Huizinga[6].

Generally speaking, the writing of history has no avant garde. On the contrary, the fate of historical writing is decided by the unadventurous many. Its disciplinary boundaries were drawn quite clearly by Leopold von Ranke—and have remained fundamentally the same since then. Contemporary historians reading Ranke will have their legitimate doubts about several aspects of his texts and may dispute any of his claims about the past, but they will be ready to grant that he presented the results of his research in much the same way as they do themselves.[7] True, a host of new objects of historical research (such as economic history) were added to Ranke's almost exclusive focus on politics and culture. The most sophisticated instruments of research,

5. There are some rare exceptions, such as Ian Mortimer's surprising essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*, September 26, 2008, 16, 17: "[H]istorians and scholars of true originality . . . can put into their works something which is rooted in life, not in evidence. Through them, people may come to understand the human past differently, and what mankind has done differently, and therefore achieve a new vision of what mankind is. . . . Ultimately it results in an idea or set of ideas which is not rooted in past evidence nor in an awareness of the historian's potential readership, but in the historian's own understanding of humanity." Quoted in B. Ebels-Hoving, *Geschiedenis als metgezel. Confrontaties met een vak 1950–2010*, (Hilversum, Neth., 2011), 254, 255. And Ebels-Hoving herself is one more exception, as becomes clear from her eloquent approval of Mortimer's argument.

6. It is hard to think of examples from twentieth-century historical writing—though Friedrich Meinecke comes to mind. Nicolas Berg showed a few years ago to what extent history and biography are interwoven in Meinecke's *Die Deutsche Katastrofe* of 1946, in which he pondered the disasters of German history in the first half of the twentieth century. The emphasis on his own experience of the past even made him consider replacing the topos *historia magistra vitae* with *historiae vita magistra!* See N. Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker* (Göttingen, 2003), 82–85. My thanks to Reinbert Krol for having made me aware of Berg's argument. Meinecke's musings cannot fail to remind one of Goethe's lengthy *monologue intérieur* (interrupted by trivial conversations with his servants and friends) in the seventh chapter of Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* of 1939. Goethe's recollections of his own life blended effortlessly into his musings on the great events of his time, on Napoleon, his defeat, the German national character, and so on. Certainly the professionalization of historical writing has been the greatest leap forward in the discipline's history. But it is now no longer feasible to deal with the past as Meinecke did in *Die Deutsche Katastrofe*. That is the price paid for professionalization.

7. This is why Leon Goldstein claims in *Historical Knowing* that the historical text's narrative "surface" is of no interest to the philosopher of history. For the very same reason, I consider it of primary importance.

undreamed of in the first half of the nineteenth century, eventually became available to the historian. But so it is in the sciences: radio telescopes and supercolliders were wholly inconceivable in Newton's time. Yet most physicists will agree that they still are doing basically the same thing as Newton. This, then, is where historical representation comes closer to the sciences than to artistic representation. One can be a historian of genius without redrawing the disciplinary boundaries of historical writing by an inch.

3. From Collectivist to Individualist Historical Experience

Obviously all this must have a bearing on how to tackle the problem of historical experience as the experiential correlate of the notion of presence discussed in the previous chapter. For it follows from the foregoing (1) that we shall have to distinguish between a collectivist or holistic variant of historical experience and the experience of the past by an individual historian (assuming such a thing exists) and (2) that there will be little hope for individual historical experience if we have to abandon collectivist or holistic (sublime) experience. Because of the disciplinary character of historical writing, we can move only from holistic historical experience to individual historical experience and not the other way around. I shall start below by making plausible the notion of a collectivist or holistic experience of the past in order to show that this kind of historical experience does indeed have its analogue on the level of that of individual historians. This allows us to conclude that there exists both a collective and an individual experience of the past. When addressing this problem of moving from collectivist to individual historical experience, I begin with the four following observations.

First, the terms "present" and "past" presuppose the existence of each other: whoever accepts the existence of a past will also have to accept the existence of the present and vice versa. But there is no a priori necessity to make use of these two terms and to recognize the existence of historical time. Consider Nietzsche's herd, which he described at the beginning of his *On the Use and Abuse of History* and about which he writes, "[T]hink of this herd in the meadows before you, it does not know what was yesterday and today, it moves around, it grazes, rests, ruminates, moves again, and so from the morning to the evening and from one day to the other, directly tied with its feelings of pleasure and discomfort to the peg of the moment and, hence, neither melancholy nor bored."[8]

8. F. Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben* (Stuttgart, 1969), 3.

Both past and present are still absent at that stage (and not just the former leaving us with some permanent present only). No past, then no present either. One could imagine a human society along these lines, though correctly characterizing such a society's experience of time would not be easy. Saying that such a society is living in an eternal present or that the distinction between a past and present has then not yet come into being would already be saying too much. For these characterizations would describe how it would be *for us* to live in such a human society and not what it was like *for these people themselves* to live in such societies. There is a radical and insurmountable incommensurability between how these people on the one hand and we on the other experience time. Even the very notion of the experience of time is questionable since it is likely to be biased too much in favor of our conceptions of time and history.

My second observation is that because of this radical incommensurability, the human society imagined just now contains nothing that might properly be said to anticipate this shift in our relationship to time and history. It follows that the shift from the former to the latter thus must be something like a miracle to the society imagined just now, as if something from a three-dimensional world had suddenly entered a strictly two-dimensional one;[9] it must be like a "Gestalt-switch" compelling them to abandon one way of seeing the world for a basically different one. Obviously, such a Gestalt-switch could be occasioned only by some very dramatic event in that people's history, though it would be more accurate to turn this around and to say that history had come into being for them only as a result of such an event.[10] At that moment—truly unique in that people's history!—the world falls apart into a past and a present, both making their entrance at the same time, excluding each other forever in the future. Nothing in their history will ever succeed in undoing this fateful separation of past and present.

Third, in whatever way we may imagine that event, we can safely say that it was collectively experienced. Any event affecting only part of a people

9. Obviously, it would be more appropriate to speak here of the shift from a three-dimensional to a four-dimensional world—on the condition, however, that this fourth dimension is not identified by the physicist's notion of time as opposed to the historian's (see chapter 2 for this issue).

10. As Thomas Mann puts it, "Und wirklich wird immer gewisser, dass des Menschen Traumerinnerung, formlos, aber immer aufs neue sagenhaft nachgeformt, hinausreicht bis zu den Katastrofen ungeheueren Alters, deren Überlieferung, gespeist durch spätere und kleinere Vorkommnisse ähnlicher Art, von verschiedenen Völkern bei sich zu Hause angesiedelt wurde und so jene Kulissenbildung bewirkte, die den Zeitenwanderer lockt und reizt." T. Mann, "Joseph und seine Brüder," in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 29. For a warm approval of Mann's insight, see J. Assmann, *Thomas Mann und Ägypten. Mythos und Monotheismus in den Josephsromanen* (Darmstadt, 2006), 17.

will fail to ensure its entry into the domain of history. What is needed is the kind of event that is stamped onto the collective memory of that people as a whole, one that is transmitted from them to their children and grandchildren and so on endlessly. It will be the kind of event that made a people into "a people" in the real sense of the word. Think of how, according to Jules Michelet, the "French people" came into being only with the French Revolution—even though he then went on to project that category on all of French history.

Fourth, as we know from anthropology, psychology,[11] and historical accounts of the dawn of mankind, humanity originally tried to make sense of this type of Gestalt-switch in terms of *myth*. Most if not all variants of myth have in common that they try to explain how history arose from nature, how at some time immortal men became mortal human beings, how a world of abundance and plenty became a world of permanent scarcity, how a situation of peace and harmony changed into permanent warfare, and how the state of nature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neo-Stoic natural law philosophy was transformed into human history with all its triumphs and terrors and its regime of happiness and despair, life and death, and so on.[12] As these examples suggest, the entrance of history on the scene is ordinarily associated with a more or less sudden dramatic and/or tragic event that made us regard what was prior to it with a sense of profound loss. This is why it may be related to that disruption of the most basic categories we associate with the sublime and why each later event in the West's history, somehow reminiscent of this exchange of a former harmonious world for a chaotic and threatening contemporary one, also rekindled the memory of that sublime primeval myth with which all of human history began.

One may also think here of traumatic events in the West's history, such as the destruction of the Italian Renaissance in the turmoil following the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France in 1494. It compelled Machiavelli and Guicciardini to write histories that they hoped would explain how the tragic ruin of their country—which they loved more than themselves—had

11. Freud's *Totem und Tabu* is the paradigmatic example.

12. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian tradition best exemplifies this kind of myth. See for this C. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge, 2007), 44–61. And note that as recently as two centuries ago the myth had lost little of its old attraction. It may well be that for most natural law philosophers the myth was a mere hypothesis they used for explaining existing human society, but that does not diminish in any way how they conceptualized that society. The paradox is that myth was expelled from sociopolitical thought only by historicism. Historicism decisively undermined the myth that originally gave history to mankind. So history can be said to have been born *twice* and historicism to have been guilty of parricide.

become possible. Think, furthermore, of the transition of all of Europe from the Middle Ages to the wholly new realities of the sixteenth century, with its disintegration of Christianity into religious disunity and the ensuing wars of religion. Think of the discovery of other peoples and civilizations in that same century that deeply unsettled Europe's self-confidence, as neohistoricists such as Stephen Greenblatt have brilliantly pointed out.[13] Or think again of the no less collective traumatic experience of the French Revolution and its aftermath and of how the simultaneous Industrial Revolution disrupted Europe's social structures in an unprecedented way.[14] And what about Europe's disappearance from world history in our own time?[15] Will that be an occasion for a collective trauma or just one more *fait divers?* The future will tell.

Self-evidently, when we think of the original myth itself and its later reenactments, the impact it had on the West's collective mind at different phases of its evolution had best be characterized in terms of experience, in much the same way that the big events in an individual human being's life—such as one's relationship to one's parents, the discovery of one's sexuality, the main moments of success or defeat in one's interactions with society, and the ultimate awareness that the hour of one's death is near—are primarily experienced by us. People who are not emotionally affected by these events we will tend to regard as psychopaths incapable of feelings of empathy with their fellow human beings. Recall the argument in the previous section that experience as understood here has no clear or direct relationship to (scientific) truth. Such events determine the matrix of how we will relate to the world—and that matrix antedates cognitive, scientific knowledge. There are no fixed algorithms for moving from how we relate experientially (in the sense of how the word is being used here) to the world to cognitive knowledge of the world, and anyone looking for them, or assuming that they must be there, is like someone who believes that we must attribute feelings to our computers in order to adequately account for the correctness or falsity of their computations.

These four observations, if taken together, can be seen as a brief phenomenology of collective or holistic historical experience. The crucial fact,

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13. For an excellent and all-encompassing exposition of this aspect of the neohistoricist contribution to our understanding of sixteenth-century historical awareness, see J. Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation: The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt* (Amsterdam, 2001).

14. For an elaboration of the present argument see my *Sublime Historical Experience,* chap. 8.

15. Or even *all* of the West, as is argued to the greatest detail in Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules . . . For Now* (London, 2010).

however, is that no society can exist unless individual human beings—such as historians—are part of it. And this raises the question of how sublime collectivist historical experience (as just discussed) can be or actually is translated to the level of human individuals without losing its character of being basically an experience of time and history.

4. Two Variants of the Nostalgic Experience of the Past

To address this issue I shall begin with a discussion of the notion of nostalgia—more specifically, that of the nostalgic remembrance of the past in which things are typically believed to be so much better than in the present. Certainly this is an attitude towards the past that we may attribute to individual historians and that will therefore move us outside the range of strictly collectivist or holistic (sublime) experience. This kind of nostalgia for the past has never had a good reputation. One need only recall Lot's wife, who looked back in nostalgia to Sodom and was punished for this by the God of the Old Testament by being transformed into a pillar of salt (this might be why the Dead Sea is so salty!).

It is no different now. People who have nostalgic yearnings for the past are often accused of being afraid of the present and future, victims of an unrealistic attitude of impotence and of incapacity for all meaningful action (thus Nietzsche in his *On the Uses and Abuses of History*). Christopher Lasch characterized the victim of nostalgia as an "incurable sentimentalist."[16] An even more devastating verdict on nostalgia was pronounced by Charles Maier: "[N]ostalgia is to memory what kitsch is to art." To this we should add that memory à la Pierre Nora is, for Maier, already much inferior to the writing of history,[17] since memory is indifferent to (historical) truth. It would not be hard to add many more examples. So when we use the nostalgic remembrance of the past as a model for how individual historians experience the past, that does not seem to bode well for the latter variant of historical experience.

But one may agree with Svetlana Boym when she argues that there is more to nostalgia than immediately meets the eye and when she insists that there is a most praiseworthy dimension to nostalgia that its detractors have

16. Quoted in D. Lowenthal, "Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't," in *The Imaginary Past: Historia and Nostalgia*, ed. M. Chase and C. Shaw (Manchester, UK, 1989), 20.

17. C. Maier, "The End of Longing? Notes towards a History of Post-War German National Longing" (paper read at Berkeley, December 1995).

always remained blind to. Boym distinguishes between two variants of nostalgia, "restorative" and "reflective":

> [R]estorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* [i.e., the actual return to the object of nostalgic yearning] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* [i.e., the pain of the soul, which is always part of nostalgic yearning], the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. . . . The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its "original image" and remain eternally young. Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude.[18]

The difference between these two models of the nostalgic experience of the past is that restorative nostalgia promises or aims for an actual return to the past as it truly was, for a "re-enactment of the past," as Collingwood would put it. Boym gives the example of a restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel that sincerely purports to present them as they must have looked in 1541 when Michelangelo had completed them all. The example already suggests some of the problems that this notion of nostalgic experience runs into. For Michelangelo had started to work on the frescoes in 1508; and one may well assume that thirty-three years later the oldest parts were no longer quite what they had originally been. So what about these? Is the original situation of these parts that of 1508 or that of 1541? Or some version in between? And what about the Cathedral of Cologne, which was completed in agreement with the original plans rediscovered in 1817, some six centuries after building began? Should building activities in the nineteenth century be called completion, restoration, or something else? Moreover, restoration has its own history, and restoration techniques that one generation believes to be absolutely reliable are exposed by a later one as having given us a gross distortion of the original work of art. An even more telling example is the hopeless aspiration of performing Bach's cantatas as they must have sounded when directed by Bach himself in the Thomas-Kirche in Leipzig. Finally, and decisively, the idea of moving back to the work of art in general in its original state still has a certain plausibility but does not work for history. We need only recall Arthur Danto's argument that the historian

18. S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), xviii, 49.

often makes use of so-called narrative sentences (whose properties were discussed in chapter 2) describing the past in terms that were not available in the past itself. Historical writing will necessarily sin against the requirements of restorative nostalgia.[19]

Reflective nostalgia avoids these pitfalls. It leaves the distance intact between past and present.[20] Even more, it feeds on this difference. As Boym puts it, "[R]eflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself."[21] Observe that Boym uses here the terminology of myth, as was the case in the previous section, though for her the term has a different connotation. The point she wants to make is that restorative nostalgia believes in a myth when thinking that a reenactment of the past is possible. Next, and more important, her insistence that reflective nostalgia takes away all emphasis on the referent is in agreement with our argument in chapter 5. For Boym reflective nostalgia is, basically, not an experience of the past itself (on which restorative nostalgia pins its hopes) but of the experience of the distance, or difference, between past and present. It is an experience of the river separating present and past and not of what can be found on the past's bank of that river.

Now a whole lot of things will become clear. Recall that we began this discussion of the nostalgic experience of the past after asking how the collectivist or holistic (sublime) experience of the past and the experience of the past of individual historians hang together. Appealing to Boym's argument, we may then say that the past *as such,* as the counterpart of the present, comes into being thanks either to some primeval myth creating the distance between past and present or to any of its later reenactments as occasioned by traumatic events such as the ruin of the Italian Renaissance or the French Revolution. All of these things have the effect of the falling apart (like a snowball being cut into two halves) of a world knowing neither present nor past into a world where the gap between the two of them has come into being and is from then on unbridgeable—and only now a past has come into being that may be a potential object of historical research. This is how the discipline of history—as a collective enterprise—becomes possible at all

19. Self-evidently, Collingwood's theory of the reenactment of the past is, in contemporary philosophy of history, the main victim of Danto's and Boym's argument about the relationship between historical writing and the past.

20. For this spatial metaphor of how we relate to the past, see my "The Transfiguration of Distance into Function," *History and Theory 52* (2011): 136–150.

21. Boym, *Future,* 50.

and why the counterpart of collectivist sublime historical experience is the discipline as such and not the individual historian.

To sum up our argument, Boym made convincingly clear that if such a thing as the nostalgic experience of the past is possible, it is likely to have the character of how she conceived of the reflective nostalgic remembrance of the past only where experience is the experience of *distance* or *difference.* This experience of difference seems at first sight to tie indissolubly the (reflective nostalgic) experience of the past to the collectivist, holistic or sublime historical experience. As we concluded in the previous section, it is only on that scale that we may expect to find the kinds of dramatic events that separate past and present for a whole people. And, again, that seems to leave little room for an experience of the past by individual (historians).

5. Individual Historical Experience

Nevertheless, with Huizinga, I believe it to be possible. Think of a domain of human culture where change takes place slowly, gradually, and often imperceptibly—for example, the domain of social conventions, of how we react to our fellow human beings and talk to them, of unreflective and self-evident customs, all part of the realities of daily life. Our natural attitude is to expect continuity or even a complete standstill here—unlike in the more prominent domains of politics or economy where tremendous upheavals affecting all of us may occur. This is not where we expect history to enact itself, and it will come as a minor shock to us when we suddenly discover that we have been mistaken about this all along. Think, for example, of Ariès's well-known argument that children were not treated in the ancien régime as they are today but as little adults instead. Seeing children in this way seems so incomprehensibly unnatural to us that Ariès's discovery will come as a complete surprise. And then, all of a sudden, a dimension of distance and difference reveals itself on a domain that we only too readily had assigned to nature rather than to history. From now on we will have to recognize that the history of education is not only a legitimate but even an important new subject of historical research.

This is how Huizinga conceived of historical experience (or "sensation," as he preferred to call it himself). In one of the two passages that he devoted to the notion in his writings he emphasizes that historical experience is preferably evoked by the most humble and unassuming things, such as a chronicle, an engraving, or a line from an old song that the past has left us—the kinds of things we would not automatically include in a list of items requiring historical investigation:

> [T]his brings us to the essence of the issue. There is in all historical awareness a most momentous component, which is most suitably characterized by the term historical sensation. One could also speak of historical contact. Historical imagination already says too much, and much the same is true of historical vision, insofar as the cognate notion of visual representation suggests a degree of determinacy that is still absent here. The German word "Ahnung" which had already been used by Wilhelm von Humboldt in this connection would almost express it if only the term had not lost its precise meaning through its use in another context. This contact with the past that cannot be reduced to anything outside itself is the entrance into a world of its own, it is one of the many variants of ekstasis, of an experience of truth that is given to the human being. It is not like the enjoyment of the work of art, nor a religious affect, nor a trembling before the confrontation with nature, nor the recognition of a metaphysical truth, but yet a member of this series. . . . This contact with the past, which is accompanied by the absolute conviction of complete authenticity and truth, can be provoked by a line from a chronicle, by an engraving, a few sounds from an old song.[22]

We are suddenly caught unawares by the chronicle, the engraving, and so on; these suddenly acquire a presence (to use the previous chapter's terminology) in which the distance between past and present can manifest itself fully only when these things acquire a presence. By contrast, the historian is normally completely absorbed by the task of converting the evidence of the past into the best account of the past he is capable of, given the present state of the art in the historiography on some topic. The historian moves here on a horizontal axis parallel to the past itself, so to speak. This is the axis that the constructivists have always had in mind. Historical experience, however, suddenly thrusts him from the horizontal onto the vertical axis connecting present and past, which is the only place where Boym's distance between past and present can make itself felt.[23]

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22. J. Huizinga, "De taak der cultuurgeschiedenis," in *Verzamelde Werken,* vol. 7, *Geschiedwetenschap, hedendaagsche cultuur* (Haarlem, Neth., 1950) 71, 72.

23. For an elaboration of Huizinga's theory of historical experience, see my *Sublime Historical Experience,* chap. 3. Against the background of Boym's two models of the nostalgic experience of the past I would now say that Huizinga insufficiently distinguishes between what Boym refers to as restorative and reflective nostalgia. Illustrative is the sentence in the passage quoted above: [T]his contact with the past that cannot be reduced to anything outside itself is the entrance into a world of its own, it is one of the many variants of ekstasis." The spatial metaphor of contact corresponds to

The image that comes to mind is that of a rubber band that is stretched further and further until all of a sudden it snaps. Initially no force is exerted on the rubber band—this is the phase when there is still a brotherly union of present and past and the idea of pulling them apart occurs to nobody. Next comes the phase where the two ends of the rubber band are slowly but inexorably pulled apart by the ever-growing distance between present and past, but nobody notices what is actually going on since the rubber band ties together aspects of the past (and the present) that no one pays any attention to. They are tacitly believed to be outside the domain of history. Tension builds up until finally the moment arrives when the tension becomes too great and—bang!—the rubber band snaps. Only then does it become impossible to ignore any longer the distance between present and past that has imperceptibly increased for years, if not for centuries, on some less perspicuous domain of the relationship between present and past. What has been postponed for far too long is then redressed in a momentary flash in the minds of historians possessing an unusually acute sense of history. The historian in question will undergo the phenomenon as a historical experience, as described by Huizinga. Indeed, suddenly the distance between present and past has then revealed itself to him, and his experience of part of the past will then indeed be essentially an experience of the hitherto unsuspected distance between the present and the past.

However, as the foregoing account makes clear, even though historical experience invites the sudden exchange of a horizontal for a vertical relationship to the past, nothing particularly dramatic or spectacular has taken place here. This individualist variant of experience lacks all aspects of the tragic and the sublime that were associated in the previous section with collectivist or holistic historical experience, if only because it primarily finds its proper locus in those forgotten and neglected domains of the past.

Historical experience may come as a revelation to the individual historian—as a moment of truth, as *αληθεια*, as discussed in chapter 6 and as Huizinga liked to see it—but other historians who have not had the experience itself will care little about it and have no good reasons for reacting otherwise. From the perspective of the historical discipline all will depend on what the historian having had a historical experience will be able to *do* with it. In history *αληθεια* has its home in historical representation and not in experience. Historical experience is much like hearing a gunshot that makes

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restorative nostalgia, whereas that of *ekstatis* suggests a moving outside oneself in the direction of the past, which would correspond to reflective nostalgia.

us look in a certain direction: all will depend on what we actually find when we move in the direction from which we heard the shot. But even if we view historical experience in this somewhat unemotional and dispassionate way, it remains true that it may give us access to what in all likelihood would remain hidden to us without it. This alone justifies a further philosophical analysis of the notion of historical experience. More specifically, collectivist or holistic sublime historical experience may enable us to deal with the problem of how historical writing as a discipline emerged and what guided it on its five-centuries-long course since the Renaissance. Here it may be helpful. But its very sublimity endows it with a character of its own, excluding a meaningful comparison with less sensational and more current conceptions of experience. This is different from the individualist experience of the past. How this typically historical variant of experience relates to its better-known cousins will be investigated in the next chapter.

6. Conclusion

The ties between historical representation and historical experience are both strong and weak. They are strong since a collectivist or holistic sublime experience of the past lies at the root of all historical representation. Without that sublime historical experience neither historical writing nor the discipline of the writing of history could ever have come into being. A reminiscence of that original experience will resonate again and again in the big events determining a civilization's or a nation's fate and in how that civilization or nation will react to them in their histories. That may grant to these histories their presence, as this notion was discussed in the previous chapter. For these big events will partly reduce that civilization or nation to the state in which it found itself at the time of its original sublime historical experience—i.e., in the situation in which the separation between past and present had not yet taken place. This is a situation that we can therefore describe as giving us the presence of the past (though, admittedly, the description is not wholly accurate because we typically have neither present nor past in that primeval situation).

But these ties are also weak in that the relationship between historical experience and historical representation will play only a very marginal role once the discipline of historical writing has come into being. The role of historical experience then remains restricted to those very rare occasions on which individual historians have an experience of the past, as explained by Huizinga. Most of its original aura of sublimity will then be lost, since the individual experience of the past will typically manifest itself in the more

pedestrian domains of human existence—domains that for that very same reason were not yet recognized as proper subjects of historical investigation, though this may under certain circumstances add a new category of presenteds or aspects of the past (see chapter 4) to the already existing ones. The decisive point will then be whether the individual experience of the past in question proves to be communicable to other historians as well or, to put it more cogently, whether the historian who has had this experience will be able to find the language to do justice to his most personal experience of the past.

This brings us to the topic of the next chapter. It may well be that individual historical experience is of only marginal significance for the discipline of historical writing since its professionalization at the end of the nineteenth century. For better or worse, historians have been successfully discouraged from entering into a more than professional, personal relationship with the past that is investigated by them. But if seen from a philosophical perspective, the notion is fascinating and worth closer scrutiny. Observe in the first place that historical experience, as discussed here, concerns primarily the question of how we relate to the past; it therefore has an existentialist dimension that is wholly absent from the cognitivism so pronouncedly present in better-researched variants of experience. In the second place, in the next chapter we shall see that in historical experience—if compared with these better-known variants—the relationship between experience and language is reversed. In these better know variants—the postpositivist conception of experience and science being a good example—language precedes experience, whereas in individual historical experience language must follow it.

CHAPTER 10

Experience (II)

1. Introduction

I began the previous chapter with a brief discussion of the constructivist account of historical writing. Most practicing historians will tend to be skeptical of it. They will protest that the constructivist's claim that our knowledge of the past is a mere construction based on existing evidence is a most unjust caricature of their discipline. And the idea that the past itself is no ingredient in the process of the acquisition of historical knowledge they will condemn as simply preposterous. In contrast to such interpretations of their discipline, they ordinarily consider their journeys through the past with just as much confidence as when they have to find their way in the cities in which they are living.

At this stage in this all-too-familiar dialogue between the historian and the constructivist philosopher of history, the latter is likely to chide historians for apparently holding on to some variant of naive positivism and for believing that facts are what the historian both needs and has. And it is undoubtedly true that historians have a penchant for falling back on not very subtle variants of positivism as soon as they begin to feel cornered by difficult philosophical queries like those posed by the constructivists. Nevertheless, I think that a positivist trust in facts is not a sufficient and convincing explanation of the practicing historian's disagreement with the constructivist. For even though the latter is likely to be a little more sophisticated about what facts

are than the average practicing historian, constructivists also believe, basically, that getting the facts straight is a sufficient basis for producing what we call historical knowledge. So there is, in the end, more common ground than real disagreement between the practicing historian and the constructivist. I guess that the practicing historian's anger about the constructivist theory is occasioned instead by the impenetrable epistemological clay layer that constructivists always locate between the historian and the past when arguing that the past itself should be no ingredient in the process of obtaining knowledge of it and that, in this sense, a direct access to the past should be denied to the historian forever. Historians will feel that this layer is a constructivist myth problematizing what is wholly unproblematic in actual historical practice.

This is interesting, for it suggests that practicing historians are not completely averse to the notion of individual historical experience, insofar as that notion is suggestive of some "direct contact with the past," to put it in Huizinga's words and which is so adamantly denied to them by the constructivist. Nevertheless, Huizinga's theory of historical experience will find little support, if any, among practicing historians. They will consider the notion of historical experience strange and difficult to relate to any part or aspect of historical writing. In sum, practicing historians intuitively embrace a position not radically at odds with that of Huizinga when he insists on the importance of the notion of historical experience, but they apparently get to that position via some alternative route.

That raises the question of what alternative route practicing historians follow to resist the constructivist's epistemological clay layer and to hold on to the belief in the possibility of a direct contact with or access to the past while avoiding the notion of experience. In the next section I shall try to develop a reconstruction of the (often implicit) beliefs that, in my view, predispose historians to a belief in the possibility of a direct contact with the past. I shall refer to this mostly intuitive view of historical writing as "the Magritte conception of history."

2. The Magritte Conception of History

There is a series of paintings by René Magritte that he called *La Condition Humaine.* All the paintings in the series have something in common. They depict part of visible reality—a landscape, a city, a street—but part of our view of that reality is blocked by a painting. For there is always the depiction of a painting in these paintings; they are always partly *paintings of paintings.* The funny thing, though, is that what you see in a particular painting is not just anything that paintings may happen to represent but exactly the same

thing you would see if there were *no* painting in that place where it pleased Magritte to paint his painting of a painting. So if *this* painting were removed and if you were to have an unobstructed view of what was behind and hidden by it, you would see exactly the same that you see *now* (in the painting). It is with these paintings just as if you were to move around in your room (or outside your house) with a mere picture frame—and then see part of the world through the (empty) frame and of course all the rest of it outside that frame.

But there is an interesting asymmetry here. Magritte imitates (or produces) this effect with a painting and *not* with a painting's frame. Obviously this would not work in reality itself. If we walk around our house with a painting, we will never be tempted to confuse what we see in the painting with that part of the world that is obscured from view by it—even if by some strange coincidence what is depicted in the painting were to be exactly identical to what can be seen behind the painting. The explanation, of course, is that Magritte used a painting for achieving the effect intended by him. In order to see this, let's distinguish between painting 1 and painting 2 where painting 1 denotes the Magritte painting itself and painting 2 the painting that is so cleverly shown on painting 1. And, indeed, then the painter can arrange things in such a way that what is seen in painting 2 is exactly identical to how painting 1 would depict reality if there were no painting 2 in painting 1. But since reality itself is not a painting, no painting could relate in a similar way to what we see in reality.[1]

Magritte's painting can be seen as a comment on the illusionism of figurative painting.[2] Figurative painting wishes to evoke in us an illusion of actual visual reality so that when we look at the painting within its frame it's just as if we were looking outside through the window of the frame. This endows the figurative painting with a peculiar paradox: of course you look *at* the painting, but you're invited to react to this as if you were looking right *through* it, just as you may look through the glass of a window to the landscape outside. *Put differently, it's just as if the painting is there only in order to efface itself.* It's just as if all the tremendous effort in making a figurative painting aims at the self-destructive purpose of making the viewer *forget* that it is there at all. The more successful the painting is in this, the less you will be aware of its very existence. So the ideal figurative painting is the painting whose existence has dwindled to mere nothingness.

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1. For an elaboration of the argument, see my *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2004), 228, 229.

2. A long list of theorists since Alberti's *Della Pittura* of 1436 took illusionism to be the essence of pictorial representation. The canonical contemporary theory is E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford, 1970).

Throughout this book painting is presented as suggestive of useful and unexpected insights into the nature of historical writing. And so it is here. For most of the traditional and commonsense beliefs of historians about the old and venerable subjectivity-versus-objectivity issue can be elucidated in terms of Magritte's paintings. Recall the famous anecdote about Fustel de Coulanges, who suddenly became worried about the spell he had cast on his audience by the tremendous power of his eloquence[3] and then exclaimed, "[M]essieurs, ce n'est pas moi, mais c'est l'Histoire qui vous parle!" Fustel distrusted what he told his audience about the early Middle Ages *not* because he had any doubts about the truth of what he was saying. Fustel was confident that the key to the scientific knowledge of the past had finally been discovered in his age, and he was neither a skeptic nor a historical relativist in the way this is true of so many historians in the twentieth century. In fact, his worries were of a more dramatic nature: the mere and ineluctable fact that historical knowledge needs a historian and historical language in order to be expressed made him uneasy, and he feared that his language might be an obstacle rather than a bridge to the past. Even more illuminating is Ranke when he laments in his *A History of England,* "It has been my wish hitherto in my narrative to suppress myself as it were, and only to let the events speak and the mighty forces be seen which, arising out of and strengthened by each other's action in the course of centuries, now stood up against one another, and became involved in a stormy contest, which discharged itself in bloody and terrible outbursts, and at the same time was fraught with the decision of questions most important for the European world."[4]

Just like Fustel, Ranke wanted to erase himself, to wipe himself out from his writings, because his presence in his writings would necessarily compromise the objectivity of his account of the past. It was not his text (or the historian) that should speak to people wanting to know about the past but the past itself. Only this could guarantee historical objectivity. And if any trace remained of the historian himself and of his own language in his presentation of the past, subjectivity would inevitably triumph over objectivity.

The same kind of worry inspired one of the weirdest historical texts ever written: Prosper de Barante's *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne* (1824–1826). Barante actually wanted to achieve what Ranke had only believed to be an

3. Eloquence did not come easily to Fustel de Coulanges. An inspector for higher education reporting on Fustel's performance as a beginning lecturer noted the following: "[I]l [Fustel] n'est pas sûr qu'il n'est pas une petite fille."

4. L. Ranke, *A History of England Principally in the Seventeenth Century,* trans. W. Boase et al. (Oxford, 1876), 467.

unattainable ideal. For when composing his history of Burgundy from 1364 to 1477, he effectively tried to realize Ranke's ideal of self-erasure by mainly constructing his history out of passages taken from the sources he had used (such as the *Chronique de St. Denis* and the writings of historians such as Froissart, Olivier de la Marche, Commynes, etc.). Stephen Bann most appropriately characterized Barante as a "taxidermist." Indeed, Barante wanted to show the past by making use of remnants of the past itself.[5] But of course the idea was fatally naive, if only because Barante himself had to select from his sources and write texts connecting his quotes. He functioned as the stage director of his work, so to speak, and was therefore no less powerfully present in his text than the producer of a movie or a play is in that movie or play.

Fustel, Ranke, and Barante shared what one might call the Magritte conception of historical writing. The historical text is here conceived of as the surface of a figurative painting that should evoke in the spectator the illusion of looking not at a painting but at reality itself. Obviously this is what Magritte had subtly wanted to suggest with his *La Condition Humaine* series, since in these paintings there would be no difference between what we see on the painting and what we would see if the painting were not in the way between us and what remained hidden behind it.

Similarly, the historical text should evoke in us the illusion that we are looking at the past itself instead of at the text. To the extent that the text is successful in achieving this effect, we can say (with Ranke) that the historian has wiped himself out; with Fustel that his audience is not listening to him—or to the historian generally—but to the past itself; and with Barante that the historian's text truly is the past itself and, more specifically, that the past is not farther away from us than the historical text doing justice to it. In sum, having access to the past itself then is no more problematic than having access to the historical text. The historian and his text are mere passive and self-effacing intermediaries between the past itself and the readers of the text. The difference between the past itself and a truthful representation of it is then wiped out in the manner suggested in Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* paintings. And if no sensible person (apart from the disreputable sect of the Derridians) will deny that we can have direct access to the historian's text lying before us, who would then doubt that we could also have direct access to the past? Having such access is *simple comme bonjour,* and we would not be in need of the acrobatics of Huizinga's historical experience for legitimating it. This is how the practicing historian is likely to react to the issue put on

5. S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clio* (Cambridge, 1984), chap. 1.

the agenda in the previous chapter. And there undoubtedly is an originality in this Magritte conception of history that we ought to take seriously and should not dismiss as merely indicating a lack of philosophical sophistication.

3. The Linguistic Turn: Language Precedes Experience (and Everything Else)

Indeed, we may laugh at the Magritte conception of historical writing. But I venture to say that we are then laughing at ourselves. For the Magritte conception has an enormous a priori appeal to all of us. It seems to be the simple truth about painting and historical writing. Intuitively almost everybody immediately subscribes to the illusionist conception of both the painting and the historical text. We all—naively or not—do believe that painting and historical text should be as good as reality itself. For if they aren't, painting and text are subjective, which we consider a criticism of them, since subjective representations distort what reality is really like. So the idea that the past itself is as accessible to us as the historical representations we have of it—and hence the idea that direct contact with the past should be no less unproblematic than direct contact with the historical text—seems to make a lot of sense. The idea is an inexpugnable part of our basic intuitions about the nature of representation in general. This is why practicing historians are always prone to saying the kinds of things that were said by Fustel and Ranke—and why the idea of direct contact with the past (or experience of the past) will have an a priori plausibility to most practicing historians, even though they will not formulate their intuitions in this way.

It therefore required nothing less than the linguistic turn in the humanities to effectively discredit the Magritte conception of painting and historical writing. The basic insight here was that we do not look *through* paintings or texts but *at* them. The insight seems deceptively simple and self-evident, but in fact it requires a tremendous effort to grasp the point and to be open to all its implications. Illusionism—the idea that the painter should create the illusion of looking through a window (the picture's frame) to what is beyond it—comes very naturally to us. It is, after all, what united painters ranging from those in Alberti's *Della Pittura* of 1436 to the impressionists with the enthusiastic admirers of their work all through the centuries.[6] And a similar story can be told for historical writing. Think of what historiography

6. For a penetrating analysis of Alberti's illusionism—having in perspectivism its main support—see M. A. Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca, 1996), chaps. 1 and 2.

(i.e., the history of historical writing) was before Hayden White and what it became after the publication of *Metahistory* in 1973. Traditional pre-Whitean historiography was textually naive: it operated on the assumption that you could always look *through* the historical text at its illusionist construction of the past and that you could compare this illusionist construction to the past itself—obviously, Mink's Universal History all over again!—and then establish what was right and wrong with it, just as you could compare what was hidden in the Magritte paintings by the paintings depicted in them to what you see in these paintings themselves—in order to find out where these paintings are right or wrong about those parts of visible reality occluded by them. This also enabled the practitioner of traditional historiography to be quite confident about where progress had been made in the history of historical writing. That would, once again, merely be a matter of comparing illusionist models of the past with the past itself, as you can do with Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* paintings. So finding out about historical progress was now just a matter of look and see. One might ask, next, what moral and political prejudices had prevented the great historians from the past from recognizing the truth of history. And these prejudices were then expounded at great length in traditional historiography. It was all a self-congratulatory comment on *wie herrlich weit wir es gebracht haben* in contemporary scientific and objectivist historical writing.

But then Hayden White came along and told us how things really are—namely, that we do not look *through* texts but *at* them and that we must recognize that the historical text is a most complex instrument meant to generate historical meaning. Hence, as he went on to say, the primary task of the historical theorist is to explain how the historical text can have this most remarkable capacity. Just as we have every reason to be deeply surprised that such humble and unassuming things as little dots of paint on a canvas have the capacity to generate pictorial meaning and be the material basis for the genius of the Raphaels, the Leonardos, the Titians, the Rembrandts, etc., so we should be deeply surprised that mere sentences arranged in a certain way in a historical narrative can give us here and now an idea of what the past was like. And we should therefore closely *look at* each historical text in order to find out how this incredible feat has been achieved there. "Looking at" now replaced the former "looking through."

This was nothing less than a complete revolution in historical thought (not in its practice, of course!), for it suddenly made historical theorists (and some historians) aware of the fact that there always *is* something—whether we like it or not—standing in the way between the historian (or his audience) and the past itself, namely, the historical text. So the constructivists were right

after all. We should add, however, that it is not some abstract argument (the constructivist's epistemological clay layer) but the very concrete materiality of the text that prevents the historian and his audience from having direct access or contact with the past.

Indeed, White—and the others who accepted the linguistic turn and all its consequences—pitilessly insisted again and again on the inevitability of the historical text as the medium between us and the past. No text, then no access to the past at all. And they rudely (but justly) imparted to us the message that you might be entirely right in condemning each effort to translate the past into a text as inevitably subjectivist, but that this only means that you will have to live with subjectivism forever—and a subjectivism of the most dramatic kind. Perhaps the historian can get rid of his moral and political prejudices. But how could we hope to represent the past in the absence of a *text* representing it?

Seen in this light, the linguistic turn added one more dimension to our awareness of the differences between the sciences and the humanities—such as the humanities, including history. Certainly the sciences (and the reflection on the sciences) have had their own struggles with subjectivism, skepticism, and relativism. Most of the philosophy of science and of language deals with this. But these have always been discussions about truth and falsity and about how to distinguish between them. And then you take the existence of language for granted, for without language you can have neither truth nor falsity. So in the philosophy of science, language as such was never questioned. It would make no sense to try to do so.

And this is different in what separates those historians and historiographers before White, still living in a happy oblivion of the (historical) text and language, on the one hand, and the language-wise adults we have become since the linguistic turn, on the other. In the sciences the issue is how to distinguish between truth and falsity—*as expressed in language.* In history the issue is language *as such:* is the historical text no less real than the past itself (as the Magritte conception of history invites us to think, whether we are aware of it or not), or is White right when he argues that we can look only *at* texts and never *through* them? The bad news is that we must abandon our hopes to see the past itself *through* the historical text, but the good news is that the historical text is an immeasurably more resourceful arbitrator between the past and ourselves than we had ever believed possible. Language is the clay, so to speak, out of which this historian models his representations, and it also is as nontransparent as clay typically is Hence, the clay layer all over again—but now transformed from a curse into a blessing.

Moving from the Magritte conception of historical language to the linguistic turn was a far more dramatic event than anything that has ever happened in the philosophy of science (as far as the role of language is concerned, to be sure). For, as we have seen, the philosophy of science, being tied to the issue of truth and falsehood, never needed to question language itself. And, indeed, no philosopher of science ever did. The philosophy of science never moved outside language. Here language always remained transparent from the perspective of truth and falsity, and it need not surprise us that Fustel and Ranke owed their confidence in the Magritte model to their belief that history is a *science.* The explanation is that the philosophy of science never questioned its own variant of the Magritte conception of historical writing and never had any real reason for doing so. Language is a servant here whom one can always control and trust, whereas the writing of history is always a wrestling with the angel of language. The historian engages here in a fight that he can neither win nor lose.

Put differently, the trajectory getting us from the Magritte conception to the linguistic turn compels the philosopher of history (unlike the philosopher of science) to objectify *all* of language, hence to make the both desperate and godlike move of asking what language does to us from a perspective that is *outside language itself.* The scientist and the philosopher of science are never pushed to such radical and dramatic extremes; they can afford to remain confident in language, even though they always indulge in some tampering with it, as is the case in the many artificial languages developed in the sciences. I readily grant that in many respects the philosophy of science is more interesting than the philosophy of history. But here at least the philosophy of history confronts us with a problem that has no analogue in all the philosophy of science. And even less so in the philosophy of language, since that discipline deliberately refrains from asking the question how language can be used for the construction of believable substitutes for parts of the world (as is the case in historical representation).

This, then, is where the philosophy of history invites us to consider a non-, pre- or translinguistic approach to history, to historical writing, and to how we relate to the past. And as we shall see, this will require us to focus on the notion of historical experience.

4. Historical Experience (Experience Precedes Language)

Needless to say, such a nonlinguistic philosophy (of history) will be even more interesting if it succeeds in making clear how it is related to linguistic philosophy (of history)—hence to the paradigm preceding it. When dealing

with this issue, we can again expect help from Huizinga and above all from Huizinga's project for a dissertation in linguistics,[7] which he had devised in 1895 after finishing his study of Sanskrit at Groningen University and before he turned to history a few years later. The main idea of the project was to use synesthesia for a better understanding of the words for sensory experience in Indo-Germanic languages—that is, the words we use for colors, sounds, or touch.

Locke had been the first philosopher to become interested in synesthesia, mainly thanks to a letter he had received from William Molyneux (1656–1698) and from which he quoted the following passage in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "[S]uppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube and which is the sphere. Suppose then the cube and the sphere posed on a table, and the blind man be made to see: quaere, whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube."[8]

Locke argued that the blind man[9] had no experience of how a cube or sphere would affect his sight and hence that he would be unable to tell them apart by sight alone. He conceived of the subject of experience as if it were a kind of metropolis where each of the five senses was just one of the terminal stations in the metropolis, without there being a kind of subway network connecting these stations with each other. So any kind of synesthetic interconnection between the senses (such as sight and touch) was out of the question for him. Kantian imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) produced this subway network that was absent in Lockean empiricism. And then the imagination might make the formerly blind man recognize which was the cube and which the sphere when he saw these forms for the very first time.

Huizinga develops his own theory of synesthesia in a discussion with the influential nineteenth-century philologist Fritz Bechtel (1855–1924), who had discussed a problem similar to the one that Locke had put on the agenda two centuries before.[10] Locke had discussed cubes and spheres, whereas

7. J. Huizinga, *Inleiding en Opzet voor een Studie over Licht en Geluid. Red. Jan Noordegraaf* (Amsterdam, 1996).

8. J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 1 (London, 1965), 114.

9. Molyneux's blind man was the English mathematician Nicholas Saunderson (1682–1739).

10. F. Bechtel, *Ueber die Beziehungen der sinnlichen Wahrnehmungen in den indogermanischen Sprachen* (Weimar, 1879).

Bechtel dealt with the perception of colors and sounds. Locke investigated the synesthesia of the senses of sight and touch, whereas Bechtel addressed the senses of sight and hearing. To take Bechtel's own example: would we relate the sound of a trumpet to the color red rather than to any other? And if so, why? Bechtel's answer was affirmative: there is a synesthetic quality that the sound of the trumpet and red do have in common and that makes us relate them. The quality in question is that both are *penetrating*—and this explains their synesthetic affinity.

Huizinga agreed with Bechtel about all this, but he considered Bechtel's argument to be unsatisfactory. He argued as follows. When accounting for synesthesia, Bechtel requires us to consider a set of sounds and a set of colors, and each time we hear one sound from the set of sounds or see a color from the color set, we jot down on a piece of paper the adjective best capturing the experience. And then—such is his argument—we shall discover that the adjective "penetrating" is used for both the *sound* of a trumpet *and* the *color* red.

Huizinga observed that in this approach the phenomenon of synesthesia is merely *established* rather than *explained*. Bechtel did empirical research on synesthetics but never asked himself how to account for the data he had discovered. In order to remedy Bechtel's shortcoming, Huizinga suggested replacing Bechtel's horizontal approach with a vertical one. Bechtel's approach can be described as horizontal since he was content to observe that most people will associate the adjective "penetrating" with both the color red and the sound of the trumpet—and this allows him to pair the two. Huizinga, however, preferred the vertical approach, where the idea is that we (and language) can move *closer to* or *away from* the world on a vertical axis. In Bechtel's example synesthesia refers to a (synesthetic) experience, say E, that the color red and the trumpet sound have in common. *E therefore reduces us to a stage where sensory experience has not yet been split up into sounds and color and has therefore to be situated on the vertical axis closer to reality than our experience of sounds and colors.* E is permanently and ubiquitously present in our sensory experience of the world, but we never notice it, since we always neatly divide up all our sensory experiences into perceptions of sound, color, smell, taste, and touch. Only when we try (vertically) to explain synesthetics do we suddenly become aware of its presence. Finally, observe that we associate the adjective "penetrating" with the color red and the sound of a trumpet—but there is no a priori reason why we should do so with E, too—which is, after all, not the experience of a color or a sound exclusively and must therefore be different from them. So for describing the experience of E we will need *another* word than "penetrating." Huizinga proposes the word "fierce" (*fel* in Dutch) for that purpose.

Huizinga derives some amazing conclusions from this. In the first place, it follows that the word "fierce" succeeds in doing what Bechtel's word "penetrating" failed to do: it will bring us to a level of experience—the level of synesthesia—where the differentiation between sounds and colors has not yet taken place. This is clearly so, since fierce describes what the experiences of sounds and colors still have in common. From this it follows, again, that we can categorize terms like "fierce" and "penetrating" in categories that are either *closer* to the world ("fierce") or *less so* ("penetrating"). Put differently, "fierce" suggests a more direct and immediate experience of the world than the word "penetrating."

I would not hesitate to applaud this as a most revolutionary discovery, for no philosopher of language has ever used synesthesia (or any other property of language) to uphold the interesting claim that we should discern these layers in language, legitimating the claim that some words in ordinary language are closer to the world than some others. There is a quasi-vertical axis on which we can measure whether the language we use is closer to or farther away from reality. In fact, these phrases "closer to reality" or "farther away from reality" are meaningless if not simply nonsensical within the framework of contemporary philosophy of language, though reductionists may still feel a certain nostalgia for them (but nobody in his right mind would relate Huizinga's speculations on synesthesia to the reductionist thesis).

And no less fascinating is the following: when exchanging "penetrating" for "fierce" Huizinga also insists that "fierce" is a *stemmingswoord* (i.e., the term for a certain mood or feeling).[11] In this context I'd like to recall O. F. Bollnow's theory of moods and feelings as presented in his book on that theme. Bollnow's main (Heideggerian) claim here is that moods and feelings are both subjectless and objectless; they reduce us to a phase prior to the separation of subject and object. Unlike emotions such as fear, love, and hatred, they are objectless, since they bring us to a stage in which the contours of identifiable things have not yet come into being. They are subjectless, since I could not possibly say that these moods and feelings are mine; it's rather the reverse: these moods and feelings have us, are larger than ourselves, so to speak. We are in these moods and feelings, but they are not in us. Bollnow quotes S. Strasser as follows: "[I]n moods in the true sense of the word there is no 'I,' there are no objects, and no borderlines between the self and the objects of the world. One should rather say: the borderlines of the self fade

11. For a further discussion of the role of moods and feelings in our relationship to the past, see my *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, 2005), 306–312.

away and disappear in a peculiar way. Self and world are embedded in an undivided totality of experience. Moods are experiences of both the self and the world."[12]

Recall now the argument of the previous chapter about how the distance between present and past emerged from a situation antedating both of them. In myth, in sublime historical experience, and in what I referred to as individual historical experience this primeval unity breaks up, the distance between past and present comes into being, and hence a historical object lending itself to investigation by either the historical discipline as a whole (corresponding to collectivist sublime historical experience) or that of individual historians (individual historical experience). It follows that Huizinga's appeal to moods and feelings is suggestive of this primeval phase—in which the differentiation between present and past is obliterated again. We might then speak, with Huizinga, of a direct contact with the past—not because past and present have now come infinitesimally close to each other but because we have momentarily returned to that primeval phase in which present and past were not yet separated—and hence in which there could not yet be any distance between the two of them.

5. Historical Experience in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*

Though Huizinga never returned to this dissertation project, it would provide him with the background for much of his later writings on history, historical writing, and what he referred to as "historical sensation"—what I'm calling historical experience here. Moreover, it gives us the matrix for a better understanding of his major work, *The Waning of the Middle Ages.* The book begins as follows:

> To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life. . . . Illness and health presented a more striking contrast; the cold and darkness of winter were more real evils. . . . We, at the present day, can hardly un-

12. "[E]s erscheinen in den echten Gestimmtheiten überhaupt kein Ich, kein Gegenstand, keine Grenze zwischen Ich und Gegenstand. Man müsste im Gegenteil sagen: die Grenzen des Ichs verschwimmen und verschwinden in eigentümlicher Weise. Ich und Welt werden in ein ungeteiltes Totalerleben eingebettet. Stimmung ist Ich- und Weltgefühl zugleich" See O. F. Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1941), 40, 41.

> derstand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine were formerly enjoyed. . . . Then, again, all things of life were of a proud or cruel publicity. Lepers sounded their rattles and went about in processions, beggars exhibited their deformity and their misery in churches. . . . Executions and other public acts of justice, hawking, marriages and funerals, were all announced by cries and processions, songs and music. . . . The contrast between silence and sound, darkness and light, like that between summer and winter, was more strongly marked than it is in our lives. . . . All things presenting themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms, lent a tone of excitement and of passion to everyday life and tended to produce that perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness which characterize life in the Middle Ages.[13]

In these passage the contrasts—the *distance*—between present and past is heavily emphasized. It is probably no coincidence that Huizinga titled first chapter of this book "The Fierceness of Life"[14] ("Levens felheid," in Dutch)—precisely the term he had used in his dissertation project in order to explain the synesthetic potentials of language. We may surmise that he deliberately decided to exploit the synesthetic power of the word "fierce"—which he had discovered some twenty years before—in order to move his readers onto that vertical axis between present and past that may intensify our experience of the past.

However, it might be objected now that *felheid* (fierceness) is presented here by Huizinga as a characteristic of the Middle Ages itself—and *not* of how we relate to that period. I am prepared to go along with this criticism but have two reservations. In the first place, precisely in the context of a discussion of historical experience the opposition of characteristics of the Middle Ages itself," on the one hand, and how we relate to it," on the other, tends to disappear. Historical experience, as discussed in this chapter, concerns the issue of how we relate to the past, and this relationship can be expressed only in terms of the characteristics of the part of the past in question. So it is here: in his discussion of the fierceness of life Huizinga begins with a most powerful exposition

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13. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,* trans. F. Hopman (London, 1990), 9, 10.

14. In Hopman's clumsy translation—"The Violent Tenor of Life"—the synesthetic character of fierceness is lost.

of how we relate to what life was like in the late Middle Ages. And how does he do this? By informing us about its most striking characteristics. Indeed, what other means did Huizinga have at his disposal? The historian wishing to portray life in the late Middle Ages can do little else but paint an image of what he sees as its most striking characteristics.

In the second place, when we read *The Waning of the Middle Ages* closely, we will find that there was a certain set of words Huizinga liked to use for pulling his readers into that vertical axis of the synesthetic relationship between language and the world typically productive of the historical experience of the past. Apart from "fierce," one may think here of words like "high," "heavy," "sharp," and, above all, words for color (to which we shall return in the next section). It is not easy to find a system in this aspect of his prose, though it has been suggested that the common denominator is Huizinga's preference for words robbing language of its tendency to abstraction while exploiting to the full language's capacity to hide itself behind those aspects of reality indicated by it. To formulate it in terms of our argument in chapters 4 and 5, there is in Huizinga's writing a propensity to exchange the referentialist for a representational use of language. And whereas the referentialist use of language is seen to be guilty of abstraction in separating subject and predicate the representational use of language carefully respects their unity, thus giving us the concreteness of experience. This is where we may discern the link between individual historical experience discussed in this chapter and representation—and the notion of the aspect—as introduced in chapter 4.

In the previous section we discerned two dimensions to Huizinga's speculations on words for color in his dissertation project: synesthesia and the idea that synesthetic terms such as "fierce" express a certain mood or feeling. Let us now turn to that second dimension. It announces itself in the introduction to *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* where Huizinga informs his readers of the mood in which he wrote the book: "[W]hen I was writing this book it was as if my gaze was directed into the depths of an evening sky—but a sky full of a bloody red and angry with a threatening lead-gray, full of a false copper shine."[15]

The following points should be made here. First, the passage in question in fact summarizes the book in one sentence. Better than any other single

15. J. Huizinga, Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen, *in id., Verzamelde Werken III. Cultuurgeschiedenis* (Haarlem, 1949), 3. The preface is unfortunately not in the English translations of Huizinga's book that I am acquainted with.

sentence it captures the impression the book makes on its (well-informed) readers and what is essential to the book. It offers us a synthesis of that rude and brutal world of the late Middle Ages, the dazzling splendor of the Burgundian court and its Gargantuan feasts, the most hideous political crimes, and the extremes of this-wordliness and intense piety, as seen by Huizinga. All these very different things are taken together in this poetic description of an uncanny evening sky. The historian's task is, as we all know, essentially synthesis: the historian must be capable weaving all the strands of the past together into a coherent whole. Second, synthesis seems to blend into synesthesia here: words that Huizinga so often used for the synesthetic experience of the past—such as a "bloody red," a "threatening lead-gray," a "false copper shine"—all appear here in a single sentence. Just as historical synthesis discerns a common denominator in the past's phenomena that are, at first sight, no less remote and different from each other than colors and sounds, so synesthesia may allow us to discover what such different things as sounds and colors do have in common by suggesting a vertical axis in how we relate to the world and experience it on which both of them can be projected. Hence synesthesia is retained if we move from the synesthetic experience of the world to that world itself—as a potential object of historical experience. Third, this brings us to the real secret of historical experience: after having been placed on the vertical axis of historical experience, we will encounter the past in terms of moods and feelings—in terms of a relationship to the world in which the boundaries between subject (the historian) and object (the past) are dissolved, as we saw in the previous section. Taking all this together, we are able to explain—and to justify—what seem at first to be very strange if not downright preposterous claims by Huizinga about historical experience and its nature.

The implication is, furthermore, that in historical experience the venerable problem of subjectivity versus objectivity will lose its meaning: what is left of the problem if the boundaries between subject and object have been wiped out? We shall return to that problem in the next chapter.

6. Goethe on the Experience of Color

I said above that the vertical axis Huizinga had introduced between subject and object also implied the most untimely claim that language had to follow experience and not the other way around, as everybody would chorus nowadays, the adherents of the linguistic turn being the most vociferous among them. But what might this mean? How can language follow experi-

ence? This, then, is where Goethe's *Farbenlehre* of 1808 may be surprisingly helpful.[16]

Admittedly, nobody will take seriously for a moment Goethe's claim that his *Farbenlehre* offered an alternative to Newton's optics. But we might read Goethe as follows. There are colors—and we can then do two things. We can establish—with Newton—the physical properties of light of different colors and what effect these properties have on our retina. The successes of this strategy are, of course, indisputable. But we might also ask ourselves how we *experience* colors—to what experiential state the perception of a certain color will bring us. This question is obviously completely irrelevant to Newton's optics. And, next, what is the predicament of language when we require it to put an experiential state into words? Questions like these are just as irreducible to those Newton asked as our states of consciousness are irreducible to states of our neurophysiological apparatus (assuming the present consensus on the mind/body problem to be correct).

Goethe argues that then a systematic uncertainty will arise in the relationship between colors and the language we use for expressing our experience of them (no such thing being the case, of course, in the Newton strategy). The experience of the color is there—as clear and well defined as an experience could possibly be—but only tentatively and gropingly can we try to make language capture the experience, without it ever being wholly successful in what we ask it to do. Of specific interest is Goethe's characterization of how we try to make language do what we want:

> The necessity and suitableness of such a conventional language where the elementary sign expresses the appearance itself, has been duly appreciated by extending, for instance, the application of the term polarity, which is borrowed from the magnet to electricity, &c. The plus and minus which may be substituted for this, have found as suitable an application to many phenomena; even the musician, probably without troubling himself about these other departments, has been naturally led to express the leading difference in the modes of melody by major and minor. (757)For ourselves we have long wished to introduce the term polarity into the doctrine of colours. (757)[17]

In order to do justice to how we experience colors, we will rely on polarities, differences, and the contrasts between different colors. There are no

16. J. W. von Goethe, *Theory of Colours,* trans. C. L. Eastlake (London 1840).
17. Ibid., 303.

"pure" colors, but only colors such as red-yellow, yellow-red, red-blue, blue-red, bloody red, a threatening lead-gray, and a false copper shine—to add just a few examples from Huizinga, which are quite appropriate in the present context. And Goethe lengthily describes some of these mixtures of colors. But there is never a natural, fixed, and immutable link between language and experience here, so the only alternative left to us is to start to paint with words, so to speak, and try to find that mix of words that comes closest to the experience. Here, then, experience is lord and master, whereas language breathlessly runs after experience in a forever vain effort to keep up with it. Above all, when trying to make language do what it should, we shall have to rely, as Goethe insisted, on *other* color words, on words for other colors. Here his argument is in obvious agreement with our own on meaning in chapter 7. The meanings of color words are no less dependent on those of other color words than the meaning of one historical representation is on other such representations. And in both cases truth is never the (final) arbiter. Truth may make its entrance only when meaning has become codified and has been robbed of its basic indeterminacy.

Goethe's theory of color has a most welcome empirical confirmation in a defect known as "color anomia": "Patients with color anomia perform normally on tasks that require discrimination of colors but cannot name colors or point to colors named by the examiner. There is a distinction between color perception versus color recognition."[18] So patients suffering from this defect have no problem with experiencing colors: they experience them just as we do. They are not color-blind. But they are systematically unable to *name* their experience since there are no examples for fixing unambiguously the relationship between experience and our language for colors, as we could do for words like "square" or "circle." When we have explained to somebody what squares and circles are and have shown him a few examples of them, if he is even then incapable of correctly recognizing squares and circles, we can only conclude that something must be wrong with his perceptive faculties.

But there's nothing wrong with the relevant perceptive faculties of these people suffering from color anomia. Rather, they have a systematic problem with moving from color *experience* to color *words.* They have not succeeded in internalizing how color words are used in the culture of which they are part. Their defect is therefore not cognitive but cultural. It is as if they have always continued to live in a Rousseauesque state of nature for at least this aspect of the human condition. All this suggests that the language we use for

18. See http://www.nanonline.org/nandistance/mtbi/ClinNeuro/agnosia.html.

expressing our experience of colors must somehow be radically and irreparably defective—and this is why for some people it is impossible to learn. However, this defect of our language for colors should not be taken to mean that it has failed to achieve the referential perfection that the language for squares and circles (and the language developed by Newton for discussing color) is capable of. That would be too normative a reaction; it's not that the language for colors ought to succeed in achieving what the language for squares and circles does unproblematically. It's rather that a different logic is involved in our speaking about our experiences (of colors) than when we are speaking about squares and circles. And within *this* logic language must give up all its former pride and traditional arrogance; it now shows itself to be the lame and awkward servant of its supreme lord: experience.

Color is one of the most commonplace aspects of the world; colors are permanently around us and seem to harbor few secrets. So if language can stumble over so simple a phenomenon, one may come to feel less confident about its achievements elsewhere as well, especially when experience, or rather, the experiential states mentioned above, enter on the scene. This decline in self-confidence is most likely to be the case when we are dealing with the world of culture, art, poetry, music, emotions—and, yes, history. It is no coincidence that Huizinga so heavily relied on color words for expressing his historical experience of the Middle Ages.

7. Experience and Representation (Color and Form)

Obviously, this raises the issue of the relationship between representation and the experience of color—the problem of how to tie my account of (historical) representation in the first chapters of this book to what has been said in the previous chapter on experience and to Huizinga's suggestion, discussed in this one, to model the experience of the past on the experience of color.

When discussing color in his *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein writes: "[S]omeone tells me: 'I looked at the flower, but was thinking of something else and was not conscious of its colour.' Do I understand this?—I can imagine a significant context, say his going on: 'Then I suddenly saw it, and realized it was the one which. . . .' Or again: 'If I had turned away then, I could not have said what colour it was.' 'He looked at it without seeing it.'—There is such a thing. But what is the criterion for it?—Well, there is a variety of cases here."[19] Obviously, Wittgenstein addresses here the relation-

19. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1974), 211.

ship between color and form. And his argument clearly is that form precedes color: we may remember having seen a flower without having noticed its color. This is wholly in agreement with our intuitions about the relationship between color and form: could there be colors without there being forms that they are colors of? Put differently, we can speak of the "color of form," but the phrase "the form of color" seems to make no sense at first sight. We consider it counterintuitive since we find it hard to imagine how to predicate form on color. Surely, you must *first* have certain forms in order that they could have, *next,* a certain color? Colors, after all, are always mere secondary properties, as Locke put it.

But we need only look at the history of painting in order to recognize that this Wittgensteinian view is only part of the whole truth about form and color. Bomford discerns three stages in how color was used in Western art. He starts with Cennino Cennini's *Il libre dell'Arte* of 1390, in which Cennini recommends that painters use one basic color for draperies and lighten it progressively with white toward the lit areas. In the next stage, to be associated with Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura* of 1436, the basic color is mixed with whites *and* blacks in order to demarcate shadowy from light areas. This is what came to be known as *chiaroscuro.*[20] Before we turn to the third stage, two important observations can be made. As will be clear from these remarks about Cennini's and Alberti's recommendations, we should think here of how paint and color can be used for suggesting the *form* of clothes, draperies, or uneven surfaces. And these forms are not identifiable as the individual things themselves but are merely *aspects* of them as rendered by the painter's arrangement of colors in the painting (or representation), or, to be more precise, by the painting's presented, to use the terminology introduced in chapter 4. There are no identifiable individual things corresponding to these forms—just as, again, there is no identifiable individual thing corresponding to the notion of the middle of this plank or the average taxpayer that we discussed in the chapter on reference. And yet we have form. This form is not the form of clothes, draperies, or surfaces but of color or paint.

It might be objected, though, that I am confusing here the form of color with the form of draperies, etc. as suggested by how the color has been used. This brings me to my second observation. As Cennini's and Alberti's recommendations make clear, form comes into being by adding whites and/or blacks to one basic color and they are articulated by variations of the (same)

20. D. Bomford, "The History of Colour in Art," in *Colour: Art & Science,* ed. T. Lamb and J. Bourriau (Cambridge, 1995), 18–38.

color. Form arises when all the shades of one and the same color are used in order to suggest light and darkness. However, if this is so, what still could count as the original color returning in all the hues and values in which this color can be presented? It now is as if in music we had an endless set of variations on a certain theme but without the theme itself. The color then exists only in its disseminations; its heart, or essence, has gone. Form then follows color, instead of the other way around (as Wittgenstein had argued)—there no longer is an essence functioning as the unchanging form to which a certain color is given. This, then, may justify the apparently absurd locution of the form of color: the color is used for expressing a form present in itself.

It also follows that we should decide the famous seventeenth-century battle between the Rubensians and Poussinistes about *colore* versus *disegno* in favor of the former. According to the Rubensians it was *colore* that determined *disegno,* or form, and not the other way around. The adherents of Rubens would have welcomed this notion of the form of color discussed in the previous paragraph. They would have agreed with Plato's statement in *Meno:* "[J]ust consider if you accept this description of it: figure, let us say, is the only thing existing that is found always following color."[21] This priority of *colore* to *disegno* becomes all the more clear if we turn to the third stage in the use of color in Western art. Listen to Palma Giovane's celebrated account of the older Titian at work on such paintings as the *Death of Actaeon:*

> He used to sketch in his paintings with a great mass of colours as a bed or base for his compositions . . . then he used to turn his pictures to the wall and leave them there without looking at them, sometimes for several months. When he wanted to apply his brush again, he would examine them with the utmost rigor, as if they were his mortal enemies to see if he could find any faults. Then he gradually covered these forms and in the last stages he painted more with his fingers than his brushes.[22]

The form of color here no longer announces itself merely in the forms of clothes, draperies, or surfaces but in the painting's composition itself. All the composition's forms—such as those of the human beings depicted, trees, flowers, landscape, etc.—have now become emanations of the painting's colors and are now expressions of the form of color. This is where Titian began a stage in the history of Western art that would run from him via

21. Plato, *Meno,* 75b.
22. Quoted in Bomford, "History of Colour," 21.

Rubens, Watteau, Fragonard, and Guardi to the impressionism of Monet and Cézanne. In the work of all these painters color precedes form, and the work could be said to present us with the form of the painting's color.[23]

With this in mind let us return to Huizinga. To begin with, right after having given his most elaborate account of historical experience (or sensation), he develops what he calls a "historical morphology," a doctrine of historical forms: "[T]he great cultural historians have always been, in the absence of any well-defined program, historical morphologists: searchers of forms of life, thought, custom, knowledge and art. Their success can be measured by the clarity with which the defined these forms."[24] He hastens to add, however, that complete clarity can never be achieved and that a cultural form is always, as he puts it, "a vague thing." Moreover, he explicitly warns against the danger of trying to grant a fixity that can never actually be granted. In the first place there is the temptation to fix historical forms by psychologizing them. But Huizinga firmly rejects any such attempt since historical forms always belong to the domain of what exists *between* human individuals, not to that of individuals themselves and to whatever their psychologies may be.[25] Second, the cultural historian should at all times avoid reifying historical forms into mythologies, as Spengler had done in his *Untergang des Abendlandes.* Admittedly, as the book's subtitle, *Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte,* suggests, Spengler had also wanted to capture the human past in terms of forms—namely, those of the five great civilizations he discerned in human history since the dawn of mankind. However, forms no longer arise here from how the past presents itself to us but are a Procrustean bed to which the past must conform itself. Spengler had projected on the past an

23. As Monet put it to his biographer, Lila Cabot Perry: "[W]hen you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, and a field or whatever. Merely think here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives you a naïve impression of the scene before you." Quoted in ibid., 24.

24. J. Huizinga, *De taak der cultuurgeschiedenis* (Groningen, Neth., 1995), 77. Think also of the subtitle of the *Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the* Forms *of Life and Thought in the France and the Netherlands of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* [my emphasis]. Huizinga's notion of form should not be related to Cassirer's symbolic forms, which are basically a sociologization of Kant's transcendental idealism. Huizinga's forms are predicated on the object (historical reality itself) rather than on the subject. Decisive for Huizinga was the book by his close friend André Jolles, *Einfache Formen* (Halle, 1930) reducing all of cultural life to nine basic forms, such as legend, myth, enigma, proverb, fairy tales, and the joke. See W. E. Krul, "Huizinga's definitie van de geschiedenis," in Huizinga, *Taak,* 306.

25. Huizinga, *Taak,* 75.

"anthropomorphist morphology"; that is to say, he had granted to historical abstracts or forms, such as capitalism, humanism, and revolution, the capacity of quasi-human agency.[26] Thus Huizinga in his critique of Spengler.

And then a forbidden barrier has been overstepped: forms are then taken to be given to us prior to historical search, only waiting to be filled with historical data. *Colore* has then been abandoned for *disegno.* Whereas in Titian's *The Death of Actaeon* the form of Actaeon—half human, half deer—is born from, or merely suggested by, the colors surrounding him, we then have moved into the realm of individual things with colors as their secondary properties. The form of color has now given way to the color of form. But again, it is the former that Huizinga has in mind with his historical morphology: "[The historian] not only encloses within lines the forms he designs, but also colors them with the concreteness of the visible, and permeates them with a visionary suggestion."[27]

This, then, is what one might call the color of the past, in which it may reveal itself to the cultural historian. Huizinga's repeated insistence that the experience of the color of the past is an experience of form makes clear that this experience is a matter of the form of color and not of the color of form (in the way that children paint in the colors of the forms of trees, houses, dogs, and so on). Form here is a *natura naturans* rather than a *natura naturata,* to use Spinoza's terminology, particularly appropriate in this case. But as such, it may move us ever closer to the latter.

In chapter 6, section 2, I described aspects as *less* than things but more than properties. In fact, with historical forms as the potential objects of historical experience, we hit upon the borderline between aspects and things—a borderline having the features of both and, hence, where aspects are on the threshold of becoming objects or individual things—but without ever actually transgressing that threshold. This, then, is where representation and description may come infinitesimally close to each other, though, paradoxically, their rendezvous is not to be located on an imaginary line connecting representation and description to each other as directly as possible (as one would have expected) but where both are removed farthest from each other, namely on the domain of historical experience. At the same time, we find here the threshold between representational and propositional truth discussed at the end of chapter 7.

26. Ibid., 79.
27. Ibid., 76.

8. Empiricist and Historical Experience

It is clear that Newton's theory of color had opened up an old sore in Goethe; his struggle with Newton therefore went far beyond the problem of a theory of color itself. What had disturbed Goethe so much in Newton's theory of color was what he had always hated in modern science—namely, the ease with which it had replaced a previous conception of experience with a new one.

The matrix in terms of which the modern conception of experience had best be conceptualized can be found in the following statement by Robert Boyle: "[E]xperience is but an assistant to Reason, since it doth indeed supply information to the understanding, but the understanding still remains the judge, and has the power or right to examine and make use of the testimonies that are presented to it."[28]

Indeed, this is how experience was always understood in empiricism, down to the present day. And it will be perfectly clear where this conception of experience differs from the one we encountered when discussing Huizinga and Goethe. In empiricism reason is the master and experience its obedient servant; it merely communicates to the subject what nature has to say in answer to the questions reason asks it. And as long as we have no questions to ask, experience has nothing to say to us. Its role is basically passive; in empiricism we are never overwhelmed or unpleasantly surprised by the data of experience as is the case in life, where we are continuously compelled to adapt in some way or other to experiences we cannot foresee. Empiricist experience is a thoroughly domesticated and truncated variant of experience devoid of the unforeseeable terrors and joys of experience in actual life.

Little has changed since Boyle down to the present day. Though few philosophers will nowadays call themselves empiricists, Boyle's regime of reason and experience was taken over almost universally and even by philosophers hostile to the empiricist tradition. Whether the role of Boyle's reason was performed by the notion of the subject or by that of language or theory, experience always remained in the same subordinate positions to reason and its many successors. To put it in the vocabulary of contemporary philosophy, if there is just one thing that all contemporary philosophers, of whatever denomination, agree about, it is that language determines experience, and not the other way around. The idea that experience might be prior to language was rejected by Sellars's dismissal of "the Myth of the Given," by Quine's attack on the two dogmas of empiricism, by Donald Davidson's

28. R. Boyle, *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle,* vol. 5 (London, 1672), 171.

holism, by Gombrich in his criticism of "the Myth of the Innocent Eye," by the thesis of the theory-ladenness of empirical facts, by Richard Rorty's slogan that "language goes all the way down," and by Derrida's condemnation of the "metaphysics of presence,"[29] and one could think of many more examples. There is a strain of rationalism in Western philosophy that one will encounter even in philosophies explicitly questioning rationalism. Just think of contemporary philosophy of language.

Next, Boyle's statement makes us aware of one more feature of the empiricist notion of experience. Its suggests that there is a reasoning mind (to be called the knowing subject) that develops conjectures about the world it investigates (the object of knowledge). There is no overlap between subject and object. And if the subject starts investigating itself (as in the medical sciences, brain research, or psychology), we should think of these parts of the self as being included within the world of the object. In the end this empirical self or subject will shrink into a transcendental self, the mere condition of the possibility of knowledge and of which (as this very denomination makes clear) no empirical knowledge is possible.

Two things follow from this account. In the first place, experience is to be located always between the subject and the object and does not overlap with either of these. It cannot overlap with the object since the object does not have the capacity of experience. Next, though an experience may cause the subject to be in a sentential state, it could never itself be part of the subject. Confusing experience with the subject's sentential state would be an improper, transcendentalist use of the notion of experience (to use Kantian terminology), inevitably resulting in idealism because the subject would then be the cause of its own experiences. So when the empiricist philosopher has reached the logical conclusion of his own argument, a strict separation between subject and object has come into being: a separation that is identical with that between the transcendental self and the world. Put differently, subject and object will come ever closer to each other and in the end be separated only by a philosophical category. As Schopenhauer said about subject and object, "They share a common border: where the object begins, the subject ends."[30]

Now if experience is to be located anywhere, where else could this be than between the subject and the object? Is experience not the experience a subject has of an object outside it and hence the bridge between the two of them

29. See for this notion the introduction to the previous chapter.

30. A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*,. trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2010), 26.

over which data about the world are carried into the inner sanctum of the subject? But if subject and object border directly (Schopenhauer's *unmittelbar*) upon each other, if the border between the two becomes in the end as ethereal as that between the transcendental self and the world—what would then be left of experience at all? All space will then be consumed by the subject and the object with the result that experience will be crushed between the two of them. It seems to follow, then, that the empiricist's notion of experience will actually have to be dropped if the implications of empiricism have been thought through to their very end. There is no such thing as experience containing elements that cannot be reduced to either the subject or the object. It need not surprise us anymore that Western philosophy—insofar as it drew its inspiration from a scientistically oriented empiricism—has always given such little attention to experience itself—and if it succeeded in connecting knowledge and the world as the empiricist wanted it to do, it did so rather by the pleasant associations we have with the word than by any solid argument. Empiricism is the philosophical position that can hold on to the notion of experience only at the price of inconsistency.

In history experience is better entrenched. In the first place, whereas in empiricism, reason, the subject, and language are lord and master while experience is their docile servant, it is the other way around in history. In the section on Huizinga we found that he modeled the relationship between the historian's language and the past on synesthetics, and then language is a function of (the intensity of) experience instead of the reverse. Huizinga's bold intuition was confirmed by Goethe's theory of color and contemporary accounts of color anomia. Experience is here the active partner of the two, so the subject, reason, and language will have to do their best in order to keep pace with it.

Next, if empiricism inevitably ends up in the dyad of the transcendental subject or self on the one hand and reality on the other, while thus eliminating the biotope of experience, no such stark distinctions are possible in history. History is empiricism's other, so to speak, with the implication that historians would be well advised to avoid parading themselves as empiricists. For as we all know—and Gadamer (having learned the lessons from Heidegger) even better than all of us—we're part of the past and the past is part of us. In the world of history and culture the demarcation line between the subject and the object is typically unstable and, in fact, impossible to define. Can you say where you yourself "end" and where history "begins" (or the other way around)? The roots of history reach into the deepest parts of our mind and are impossible to isolate completely from what or who we are

ourselves.[31] The past—and I do really have in mind here a past stretching out to the very roots of our civilization—is as such not an entity that only historians come across in their academic researches but a companion permanently closer to us than even our parents, our wives and husbands, or our most intimate friends. It is our second self, and all of our life is a continuous fight with history. The notions of the subject (self) and the object (history) can then never be defined clearly against each other—which certainly is not meant to imply that they have ceased to exist and have now coagulated together into one indiscriminate whole.

But the borders between the two of them have become systematically uncertain and are always open to revision and discussion. So it is in real life itself, no less than in history. In both cases experience will resist being explained away as will inevitably be the case in empiricism. Experience will always negotiate here between the subject and the object; more specifically, because of some memorable experience the subject may decide to redefine himself or herself and the realm of the object. Experience will decide about the balance between subject and object. It may even become so prominent—as is the case in sublime experience—that it reduces the subject and the object to irrelevance. Think of someone in his forties being told by his doctor that he has cancer and a mere two months to live: where are the subject and the object at such a moment? Then there is only the unspeakable shock of the experience of hearing one's death sentence—the subject and the object make their reappearance only at some later stage when the person in question tries to describe his experience.[32] Such a person is then reduced to a state analogous to that of people confronted with the mythical sublime event that we discussed in the previous chapter—though, admittedly, this person has arrived at that stage from the opposite direction. For here subject and object dissolve in a pure experiential state, whereas in the case of sublime historical experience it is the other way around because there the experiential state falls apart into a subject (the present) and an object (the past).

9. Conclusion

I began this chapter with what I called the Magritte conception of history, one to which most practicing historians—with Ranke and Fustel de Coulanges—are likely to subscribe. We saw that this conception can be

31. See also chapter 1, section 6.

32. See for this my *Sublime Historical Experience*, 226, 227.

translated into a theory upholding the possibility of direct access to or contact with the past—what was called historical experience in the previous chapter. So my defense of historical experience agrees with the basic intuitions of historians about their discipline in spite of their well-attested reluctance with regard to the notion of historical experience. But, alas, the linguistic turn revealed the Magritte conception to be an illusion—the "illusion of illusionism," to put it in an appropriate terminology. Since Hayden White we know that the historical text always stands between us and the past and that when we mistakenly think we are looking at the past itself *through* the text, we are in fact looking *at* the historical text, which inexorably occludes the past from view.

My main argument has been, however, that the linguistic turn is not the last word about the relationship between the past and the historical text. To begin with, this issue was never really on the agenda in what is known in the humanities as the linguistic turn. As we saw in chapter 6, section 4, there never actually was a linguistic turn in the humanities in the true sense of that word. The linguistic turn is, basically, a theory about the relationship between language and reality. This is what Quine, Rorty, and so many others had in mind when using that term. But that issue was never addressed by adherents of the linguistic turn in the humanities since they focused exclusively on a variety of structural properties of the poetic or historical text. No one will deny for a moment what we owe to this focus on the historical text: it was the most important revolution in philosophy of history since World War II. But again, the issues of the reference, truth, and meaning of the historical text were left aside. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the rhetorical turn than of the linguistic turn in the humanities.

Put differently, whereas practicing historians never saw the historical text, the adherents of the linguistic turn saw only *it*. But this is an overreaction. One should therefore look here for the *juste milieu* between the two extremes. This is what I've tried to do in chapters 4 to 7. And I could have ended my argument there. Nevertheless, for two reasons it seemed worthwhile to address the topic of historical experience as well—in spite of its many pitfalls and its lack of popularity among both historians themselves and philosophers of history. For though it is true that historical experience plays only a very marginal role in the practice of historical writing, it stood at the cradle of historical writing. Without a primeval historical experience separating present and past—whatever the nature of that historical experience may actually have been like—there can be no discipline of the writing of history. Moreover, later events in the life of a civilization or a nation may provoke a partial reenactment of that primeval historical experience. That

may pull historical writing toward potential areas of historical research that would otherwise have remained unexplored.

Finally, we discussed the notion of individual historical experience, not because much is to be expected from it for the practice of the writing of history but because it may introduce into the philosophy of language a new conception of experience. This new variant differs from current ones in that experience here is the stronger partner in the relationship between language and experience. As such, individual historical experience may also contribute to a more fruitful future cooperation between aesthetics and the philosophy of language—two philosophical disciplines that have ignored each other for too long. The philosophy of history then is the *trait d'union* between the two of them: experience unites aesthetics and the philosophy of history, while language will unite the philosophy of language and the reflection on historical representation.

CHAPTER 11

Subjectivity

1. Introduction

The Magritte conception of history discussed in the previous chapter taught us what historians (implicitly) have in mind when speaking of the "objectivity" or "subjectivity" of the historical text: the historical text is objective if there are no differences between what one sees when looking at the *text* and what one sees when looking at the *past itself*. We also found that there is a peculiar sophistication in the Magritte conception of history (which I tried to rescue with the notion of historical experience), making it definitely more interesting than such naively believed views ordinarily are. One might even say that the Magritte conception still lives on, insofar as what is (misleadingly) called "the linguistic turn in philosophy of history" is clearly an overreaction to it.

In this chapter we shall analyze the objectivity-versus-subjectivity problem more closely. It is probably the oldest topic in all of the philosophy of history and was most cogently formulated by Lucianus (c. 120–c. 180) as follows:

> [T]he historian's text should resemble a clear, well-polished and reliable mirror, rendering the images of the past exactly as it perceived them and without changing anything as to their forms and color. What the historian tells us should be independent of his arbitrary preferences; the events of the past have always been there, they have happened already

> and have to be recounted. . . . He must, above all, be a man with a free soul, who has nothing to fear or hope from anyone else. If not, he will be like the unjust judge who decides in favor or against a case on the basis of the payment of money. It is the historian's obligation not to take sides and to recount everything exactly as it happened.[1]

And from the historicist's point of view some two thousand years later Ranke would not have expressed himself any differently—and this is still basically how we conceive of the problem. Lucianus's mirror metaphor is obviously a variation on the Magritte conception of history. In both cases the suggestion is that there should be a representational surface rendering reality as faithfully as a mirror would do, so that we can no longer distinguish between the reflection cast by that surface and (past) reality itself.

Both historians themselves and philosophers of history have always been well aware of the high stakes in this debate. Again and again in the history of historical writing the most painful problem has arisen that what one historian takes to be objective truth (reflecting a state of affairs in objective historical reality) is condemned as subjective speculation by some other historian (reflecting the historian's subjective moral feelings). And as we have seen in the previous chapter, there will be no remedy for this sad state of affairs. For when opposing the empiricist's account of experience to the one related to Spinoza, Vico, Hegel, and Huizinga, we found that the borders between subject and object and those between language, the world, and experience are in a permanent flux in the history and practice of historical writing. Whatever defines the historian as a human being—for example, his or her moral beliefs—may then transgress the borderline between subject and object. Though it would probably be better to say that this borderline is then partially wiped out, or impossible to determine. But whenever this happens, we can no longer hope for a strict and universally acceptable demarcation between truth and morals, between objectivity and subjectivity. This, then, is where we cannot afford to remain within historicism's intellectual matrix inspired by the scientistic ideals condemned by Gadamer.

These introductory remarks indicate that if subjective historical writing was believed to introduce something or some aspect of the historian into his account of the past that was alien to the past itself, one always had in mind the historian's moral and political commitments.[2] If historians were said to be subjective, this was always because their moral and political norms and

1. Quoted in F. Wagner, *Geschichtswissenschaft* (Munich, 1966), 34, 36.
2. See for this my *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2001), chap. 2.

values were believed to have found their way into their writings. But why is this so? Why this exclusive interest in moral and political values? Obviously historians may be present in their writings for many other reasons as well. They may have a certain style of writing, or they may be interested in quite specific kinds of historical topics, may demonstrate a stupidity in their texts from which we immediately recognize the author, or be the disciples of a certain historical school, etc. All these things may be the unmistakable signs of the presence of historians in their accounts of the past. Moreover, these other things will often be far more prominent in the historians' texts than the moral and political values they accept.

To ask why there is a focus on moral and political values is to answer it. For what explanation is more plausible than that the role of all these other factors is apparently far less to be feared than that of moral and political and values? Apparently it is far more difficult to disentangle subject (the historian) and object (the past itself) from each other in the case of norms and values than if we focus on matters of style, affinity with a certain kind of topic, sheer stupidity, or scholarly affiliation, etc. And how could it be otherwise? For obviously these latter traits are clearly all predicates of the historian and do not have their counterpart in the objective past itself. So we shall immediately recognize them for what they are—namely, immixtures of the subject—and we shall never be tempted to project them onto the past itself. For this reason they are not to be feared that much from the perspective of the historian's effort to achieve objectivity in historical writing—even if we were to agree with Hayden White that they do not manifest themselves less frequently in historical writing than do moral and political values.[3] But this is different with moral and political norms, which lead their lives in both the subject and the object. The historian will have his or her moral and political values, but these values have also been quite powerful in the past itself and even contributed considerably to what the past has been like.[4]

So this is why historians have good reasons to fear moral and political values more than anything else in their effort to achieve an objective account of the past. These values are treacherous not because they are so completely *alien* to the past or such patent projections on the past of the historian's own preoccupations. In fact, the reverse is true—moral and political values are (rightly) feared so much by historians because the spheres of the object (the past) and the subject come infinitesimally *close* to each other, to the point

3. Obviously I have in mind here the tropological grid proposed by Hayden White.
4. See for this chapter 12.

of becoming indistinguishable. Indeed, as soon as moral and political values enter the scene, it will be desperately difficult to disentangle subject and object; and what is objective truth for one historian can then be a merely subjective value for another—and vice versa.

Worse still from the perspective of the venerable ideal of historical objectivity, moral and political values may even transgress the boundaries that we believe separate the object (i.e., the past) from the subject (i.e., the historian) in *both* directions. Not only may the historian be tempted to project his own moral and political values on the past, but it may also happen that the moral and political values active in the past invade the world of the historian and his contemporaries. Think, for example, of speculative philosophies of history. The idea here is that if we look at history, we shall be able to discern a certain pattern it and that we have a moral duty to contribute to the realization of the goals of the historical process suggested by that pattern. As historical beings we participate in an all-encompassing historical moral order, and it is our moral duty to identify ourselves with that order. Freedom and morality are possible only if we are willing to participate in that order, and those who refuse to do so will be both immoral and powerless, as is expressed by the Stoicist *fata voluntem ducunt, nolentem trahunt*. There is, in sum, no morality outside the historical order of which we are part, and we have no other choice than to embrace the moral and political values that history has in reserve for us. We must conclude that moral and political values have the unnerving capacity to dissolve the otherwise solid boundaries between the subjective (the historian and his world) and the objective (the past itself) in historical writing.

This has a peculiar consequence for the traditional view of historical objectivity. As we have noted, traditionally the historian is required to refrain from the introduction of moral and political values in his writings since this would compromise his objectivity. But as we shall now have to recognize, this familiar injunction to the historian is naive because it fails to do justice to the fact that at the level of moral and political values the boundaries between the subject (the historian) and the object (the past) tend to dissolve. At that level a continuum between subject and object will come into being that prevents the successful objectification of moral and political values recommended to us by so many theorists since Weber. We cannot objectify these values in the way we can objectify the facts about a battle or a peace-treaty since these values may have their unperceived anchors in ourselves as well. And though the objectification of moral values may be easy and wholly unproblematic in many cases—no doubt about that!—objectification will become ever more difficult the closer we come to ourselves and to our inevitable bias to perceive

our values as truths. Think, in this context, of what is to count as "normal" in which our beliefs about what the world is like fuse with those about what it ought to be like. What we call "normal" often functions as a norm for how in our eyes things *ought* to be. The category of "the normal" is the Great Eraser of the demarcation between fact and value. And what category is more ubiquitously present in all discussion of human affairs?

Taking into account the foregoing, we shall recognize that there has always been a paradox in the traditional view of historical objectivity—a paradox that I propose to characterize as "the double bind of historical objectivity." I define a double-bind relationship as one between conditions and criteria such that the conditions for something to be A are incompatible with the criteria for something to be A. Think of a mother who says to her daughter, "Be spontaneous!" The daughter then has the choice between the two following alternatives: (1) she simply discards her mother's injunction or (2) she heeds her mother's advice. But if she does the latter, she cannot ever succeed in satisfying the mother's demand since enforced spontaneity is not spontaneity. So the child has the choice between either disobedience or being caught in the double bind of the incompatibility of the effort of being spontaneous (i.e., the condition of spontaneity) and being spontaneous (i.e., the satisfaction of the criteria for spontaneity). Whatever the child does is wrong.[5] "Be spontaneous" is a command impossible to obey.

Now we will encounter much the same situation in the traditional account of historical objectivity as expounded above. For traditionally historical objectivity is believed to demand of the historian that his account of the past should be free from moral and political values. However, since moral and political values cannot be objectified (as we have seen), the demand of historical objectivity presents the historian with the following dilemma. He may decide to try to satisfy this demand—just as the child may decide to wish to be spontaneous. But as soon as he tries to satisfy it, he will be forced to resort to a gesture of subjectivity of truly monstrous proportions. For he will then have to remove himself from this moral continuum between past and present discussed above. He will then have to say where he is *not*—and precisely by this self-denial place himself at the center of the stage and direct all attention to himself. He will then have to oppose himself to the past investigated by him—thereby immodestly suggesting the picture of a past and a historian as

5. The notion of the double bind was proposed by Gregory Bateson in order to explain the pathogeny of schizophrenia. See G. Bateson, "Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (St. Albans, UK, 1972).

more or less equal partners in the task of having to negotiate between the two of them some kind of epistemological deal.

The self-negation and self-constraint we ordinarily associate with the aspiration of objectivity will then paradoxically reveal itself as the most arrogant and preposterous subjectivism. Objectivism will then degenerate into a kind of negative or inverted subjectivism in which the subject underlines its presence by its pathetic and self-defeating claims about its alleged absence. It's like the situation in which somebody cries out, "Don't look at me! I'm not here! I do not exist!" and is therefore supremely successful in drawing everybody's attention to himself precisely because of all these noisy protestations. And, indeed, this comedy of self-aggrandizement by alleged self-obliteration contains a large part of the truth about the pretensions of contemporary so-called scientific historical writing (think of Braudel and his disciples of some thirty years ago).[6]

Admittedly, removing oneself (i.e., the subject, the historian) from the past (the object) *might* result in what historical objectivity has always been praised for if there were some preordained order separating subject and object that had somehow been contaminated. Indeed, in *that* case we might have recourse to some epistemology of our liking in order to pull subject and object apart and assign to each of them its proper place again. However, if there is *no* such preordained order and if there is instead this continuum between subject and object at the level of moral and political values that we identified above, then it will not be easy to conceive of a more glaring form of subjectivism than the effort to propose some necessarily arbitrary boundary between subject and object. The paradox thus is that within the traditional view of historical objectivity the strongest effort at objectivism will result in the most staggering variant of subjectivism. And this paradox clearly satisfies my definition of the double bind: for within this traditional conception of objectivity the conditions of historical objectivity (i.e., the effort to achieve historical objectivity) are incompatible with the criteria proposed for the achievement of historical objectivity.

2. Kafka and the Double Bind of Meaning and Experience

There is a famous story by Kafka called "Before the Law" or "The Gatekeeper" ("Vor dem Gesetz" or "Der Türhüter"). Kafka published the story separately in 1919 in a collection of short stories entitled *Ein Landartzt,*

6. Cf. P. Carrard, *Poetics of the New History* (Baltimore, 1992).

but it is also included in the penultimate chapter of *The Process* (*Der Process*) published by Max Brod a year after Kafka's death in 1924, where the story elicits a lengthy discussion about its meaning between Josef K. and the prison chaplain in the dark recesses of the cathedral to which K. had been sent by his superiors to show an important Italian visitor around. Though the story is quite well known, I give a brief summary. A gatekeeper stands before a gate giving access to the Law. A man from the country arrives and asks the gatekeeper to be given access to the Law. He is not allowed to pass through the gate, though the gatekeeper adds that he may perhaps be allowed to do so at some later time. So the man of the country decides to wait for this moment to come. He waits and waits until his end is near. He then raises himself from the ground with difficulty for one last time and whispers to the gatekeeper, "If everybody aspires to the Law, why is it that in all these years nobody but me came here in order to be allowed to pass through the gate?" Thereupon the gatekeeper roars in the dying man's ears, "Nobody could get entrance here since this gate was destined exclusively for you. I now go and close the gate." End of the story.

The genre of the story has been much discussed, but there is now near to unanimous agreement[7] that it should be taken to be a parable, a short allegorical story conveying some deep moral truth. And this is fully in agreement with how we experience the story: after having read or heard it, we sense that some such deep moral truth can be gained from the man's strange fate; we feel that he has been dealt with most unjustly, wonder why, and ask ourselves in what way the oracular last words of the gatekeeper can take away our bafflement. This was Josef K.'s own immediate response in *The Process* when the prison chaplain told him the story. So it is not surprising that many interpretations of the parable have been proposed. In fact, it may well be that no text in all of Western literature has inspired more interpretations than this parable of little more than one page of text. The parable has been read against the background of the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marx, Adorno, and Foucault;[8] it has been interpreted from the perspective of the philosophy of religion (Martin Buber and W. Zimmermann); and it has been argued to be a thesis on feelings of guilt (K. Weinberg and I. Henel) and on an existential sense of frustration (H. Deinert). The relationship between the gatekeeper

7. Hartmut Binder is a notable exception: "[W]erden diese Strukturmerkmale als unabdingbare Formelemente der in Frage stehenden Textart betrachtet, wird man *Vor dem Gesetz* nicht als Parabel, und schon gar nicht als Parabel im klassischen Sinn ansprechen können." See H. Binder, "Vor dem Gesetz," in *Einführung in Kafkas Welt* (Stuttgart, 1993), 33, 34.

8. W. Schönau, *Lezen, interpreteren, analyseren* (Groningen: Eigen Beheer, 1999), 9.

and the man from the country has been presented as a personality split (W. H. Sokel). There is, furthermore, a long list of Freudian (and Lacanian) interpretations of the parable (among others by H. Kaiser, J. Born, I. Yalom, G. Kurz, H. H. Hiebel, and P. Citati). Last, several attempts have been made to deal with the text with the instruments of reception aesthetics (U. Gaier, C. L. Hart Nibbrig) or to understand it (either the parable itself or as being part of *The Process*) exclusively on its own terms (H. Politzer, I. Henel, H. Deinert), all culminating in the inevitable deconstructivist and influential reading proposed by Derrida in his *Préjugés. Devant la loi* of 1985. In her exhaustive study Els Andringa discusses no fewer than forty-two interpretations of the parable for the period from 1951 to 1994, and she emphasizes that she has discussed in her book only the most important ones and that the list could be expanded further if the less authoritative readings were included.[9]

There is something profoundly worrying about this, for on the one hand we have the parable, a short story of fewer than seven hundred words written in clear and unambiguous prose, and on the other we have enough interpretative writing on the parable to fill a whole library. Moreover, if we wrestle our way through this jungle of interpretation, we cannot possibly discern any ongoing process of continuous refinement of previous interpretations. If there is any recognizable development, it is not informed by aspects or elements of the parable itself but is merely a reflection of the different fashions that have been adopted in literary theory since the fifties (traditional hermeneutics, Gadamerian hermeneutics, reception aesthetics, [post]structuralism, deconstructivism, etc.).

In our despair about this scandal of literary theory (as one might well call it!), we might momentarily consider a rehabilitation of a traditional hermeneutics aiming at the reconstruction of authorial intention,[10] particularly since the chapter in *The Process* of which the parable is part ends with a penetrating discussion between Josef K. and the prison chaplain about its meaning. And it seems a reasonable assumption that this debate will give us an idea of what Kafka himself must have had in mind with the parable. However, even this attempt to solve the riddle of the parable must remain unsuccessful. In the first place Kafka's own commentary focuses on only one aspect of the parable—the relationship between the man from the country and the gate-

9. E. Andringa, *Wandel der interpretation. Kafka's "Vor dem Gezetz" im Spiegel der Literaturwisschenschaft* (Opladen, Ger., 1994). The interpretations given in this paragraph have been taken from Andringa's book, especially chapters 5 to 7. Here one will also find all the references to the relevant texts.

10. For a discussion of authorial intention, see chapter 7. See M. Bevir and F. R. Ankersmit, "Exchanging Ideas," *Rethinking History* 4 (Winter 2000): 351–373.

keeper—without explaining how insight into the nature of this relationship might contribute to our understanding of the parable's meaning. In addition, we cannot be sure that Kafka really wanted to explain what he had in mind with his parable by means of the discussion of Josef K. and the prison chaplain. In this context, the chaplain's ominous statement is telling: "You should not rely too much on interpretations. The Holy Writ is unchangeable and its interpretations are often nothing else than an expression of our desperation about this."[11] But worse is still to come for the advocate of traditional hermeneutics, for Kafka confessed in his diaries that he had actually never been certain himself about the parable's meaning.[12] Elsewhere he wrote about the genre of parables in general that their meaning can never be fully ascertained, so they compel us to acknowledge in the end that "the incomprehensible is simply incomprehensible."[13] So the literary theorist can expect no solace from his appeal to authorial intention: there simply *is* no authorial intention here, to put it provocatively.

It may well be that historians will be tempted to look with unholy glee at the mess in which their often unbearably arrogant colleagues in the department of literary theory find themselves when they try to crack the secret of the Kafka parable. But they had better not be too eager with their schadenfreude about the literary theorist's discomforts, for the literary theorist can be expected to enjoin his colleague of the history department that with all this a *fabula de te narratur.* For does the history of historical writing not present us with much the same spectacle as literary theory if we are forced to discover the meaning of a parable such as Kafka's? Admittedly, nobody will doubt that there is progress in the discipline of historical writing: we know far more about the past than ever before, and there can be no doubt that a great number of historical problems can now be answered far more satisfactorily then was possible a generation ago. Nevertheless, it cannot fail to strike us that there is a kind of impasse regarding the most crucial and important issues in the history of (Western) civilization that closely resembles

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11. "[D]u musst nicht zuviel auf Meinungen achten. Die Schrift ist unveränderlich und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber." See K. Kafka, *Der Process* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 230. Note, moreover, that the prisonchaplain refers to the parable as if it were part of the Holy Writ.

12. "[M]ir gieng die Bedeutung der Geschichte erst auf, auch sie [i.e. Kafka's fiancée Felice Bauer] erfasste sie richtig, dann allerdings fuhren wir mit groben Bedenkungen in sie hinein, und ich machte den Anfang." Quoted in Schönau, *Lezen,* 13.

13. "[A]lle diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, dass das Unfassbare unfassbar ist und das haben wir gewusst." F. Kafka, *Das Ehepaar und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlass* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 131.

the one in which literary theorists got stuck when having to deal with the Kafka parable. Think of the kinds of events from which civilization must have originated (and of what, for example, Rousseau or Freud had to say on this); think of the fall of the Roman Empire, of the Christianization of the Western world, of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French and the Industrial Revolutions, the "death of God," or of the horrors of two world wars and the Holocaust. Each generation has proposed and will propose new representations of the history of such events—in much the same way as has been the case in literary theory with the Kafka parable. And if we think about what is shared by these types of historical events, we will find that they all do still have their resonance in our hearts and that none of them is part of a past that we can dispassionately discuss.

But this is probably not a very helpful and illuminating way of putting it—and, once again, literary theory may help us to come to a more helpful diagnosis of what is at stake in such interpretative impasses. Literary theory has had the courage to deal with these disciplinary impasses in a constructive way by stating that indeterminacy of meaning is precisely what makes a text into a truly great literary text, into a text that will capture the interest and fascination of readers all through the ages. Homer is Homer, Dante is Dante, Shakespeare is Shakespeare precisely because their writings will generate ever new meanings and because they will always successfully resist each attempt to be boxed into one final and authoritative interpretation. This is possible with minor writers but not with the really great authors and poets from Homer down to Kafka or Proust. It follows that we shall always have to respect the basic ambiguity of meaning of the great literary texts from the past and to adopt a way of reading that will satisfy this requirement. Steinmetz has proposed "suspensive reading"— which is always provisional and aware of the possibility of alternative ways of reading.[14] And historians might learn from this the lesson that the grandeur of their discipline is not to be found where they can achieve interpretative certainty but where they fight their never-ending interpretative battles about the past. Admittedly, certainty can be achieved in the writing of history. But the historian for whom

14. "Wenn ein literarischer Text nur so lange als literarischer Text rezipiert werden kann, wie seine Unbestimmtheit nicht aufgehoben ist; wenn die literaturwissenschaftliche Interpretation nicht rationalisierte Rezeption sein soll, die intentional auf Eliminierung der Unbestimmtheit zielt—dann muss es zu den Hauptaufgaben der Interpretation gehören, die Unbestimmtheit während ihres Textverarbeitungsprozesses dem Text zu erhalten, ja die besondere Implikate von Unbestimmtheit zu thematisieren, in ihrer Argumentation zu berücksichtigen und fruchtbar zu machen." See H. Steinmetz, *Suspensive Interpretation. Am Beispiel Franz Kafkas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1977), 42.

truth and certainty is the beginning and end of everything is like the literary theorist writing only about dime novels because interpretative certainty can be achieved there.

But even this way of putting it may not be sufficiently helpful and illuminating for our present purposes. So let us now turn to Kafka again to achieve a more satisfactory insight into the problems of interpretation as typically occasioned by great literature and—as we may now add—by the truly great events from the history of Western civilization. In his book on Kafka Hartmut Binder claims that all of Kafka's oeuvre presents us with one quite specific kind of interpretation problem and that this problem is best exemplified by "Before the Law"; this is, by the way, why Binder decided to use our parable for organizing his book on Kafka's literary oeuvre. The interpretation problem in question is defined in terms of the following decisive element of the parable:

> "[T]he double message with which the man from the country finds himself confronted is that the gatekeeper, by his stepping aside and by his recommendation to the man of the country to pass through the gate, invites the man from the country to behave accordingly, whereas, on the other hand, the interdiction to enter the gate is nevertheless upheld as well. . . . Since the man from the country is unable to combine these two messages in a satisfactory way, he must come to the conclusion that access to the Law is neither prohibited nor permitted to him.[15]

However, Binder emphasizes next that this way of framing the issue is correct for the reader interpreting the parable rather than for the man from the country himself. The explanation is that the contradiction between the two messages reveals itself only at the end of the story: only when he is about to die does it become clear to the man that he will never enter the gate. But the reader of the parable is immediately aware of this: for him this is precisely the whole point of the parable and why he will be both fascinated and confused by it: "[S]o we must assume that the double message of, on the one hand, a gate that had been especially created for the man from the country to get access to the Law and, on the other, of his being prohibited to pass through the gate *was not meant to involve the man from the country in a double bind but the reader.* And this is so because the two messages must have their effect on the reader at one and the same time" (my emphasis).[16]

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15. Binder, "Vor dem Gesetz," 192.
16. Ibid., 194.

So it is not the man from the country who finds himself involved in a double bind—that is, in the conflict of two messages canceling out each other or, as Schönau formulated it, "in a form of paradoxical and asymmetric communication where the speaker (i.e., Kafka) gives an instruction you can neither evade nor satisfy."[17] The parable strongly invites interpretation but, at the same time, successfully disqualifies each attempt at interpretation. That is the double bind of all interpretation as exemplified by Kafka's parable.

We have now at our disposal all the data we need in order to see what lessons about literary and historical interpretation we can learn from the Kafka parable. It is crucial that we clearly distinguish—with Schönau—between an initial, or "primary," phase of our reading of the parable and a later, "secondary" one in which we try to grasp the parable's meaning. It is absolutely necessary to recognize the presence of the first phase—this is the phase where a text may, and even ought to, strike us like a blow with the fist (like a *Faustschlag auf dem Schädel,* as Kafka once put it himself.)[18] Indeed, the experience is painful since it is a confrontation with the impasse of the text's double bind, where it both invites and resists interpretation (and because of this combination of pain and paradox, the reading experience in question is undoubtedly a member of the family of the sublime). More specifically, it is essentially painful since the double bind creates in us the feeling of having been overwhelmed by a reality from which we cannot emancipate ourselves and that throws us down with a superior force. The double bind is, therefore, not merely some cognitive impasse that we may undergo fairly dispassionately (this will be the case only at the secondary stage): it provokes instead a feeling of an existential hopelessness, of having been cornered by fate or by some powerful personality.[19] But at this stage the double bind is still fully present. However, the secondary phase, the phase of the interpretation, leaves no room for the double bind anymore—as will be clear from the fact that

17. Schönau, *Lezen,* 10.

18. "wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch? (. . .) Wir brauchen aber die Bücher, die auf uns wirken wie ein Unglück, das uns sehr schmerzt, wie der Tod eines, den wir lieber hatten als uns, wie wenn wir in Wälder verstossen würden, von allen Menschen weg, wie ein Selbstmord, ein Buch muss die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns." F. Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924* (New York: Von Schocken Books, 1958), 27, 28.

19. Think of what must have been the state of mind of the man from the country, or, better still, of the following passage in Kafka's letter to his father: "ich war immerfort in Schande, entweder befolgte ich Deine Befehle, das war Schande, denn sie galten ja nur für mich; oder ich war trotzig, das war auch Schande, denn wie durfte ich Dir gegenüber trotzig zu sein, oder ich konnte nicht folgen, weil ich zum Beispiel nicht Deine Kraft, nicht Deinen Appetit, nicht Deine Geschicklichkeit hatte (a more perfect example of a double bind would be hard to think of!)." See H. Politzer Hrsgb., *Das Kafka-Buch. Eine innere Biographie in Selbstzeugnissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1978), 20.

the whole raison d'être of this phase is to remove the double bind somehow and to invent some consistent and contradiction-free interpretation. It is true, however, that in the secondary phase the memory of the primary phase will never be lost: this is the phase in which the challenge of interpretation is most prominently present and that we will always have to pass through again when thinking about new, alternative interpretations. So interpretation is a continuous moving away from and then return to the reading experience.

So it is in literature—and in history as well. We *experience* the truly great events of the West's history before obtaining cognitive access to them, and we experience them since they weigh upon us like a heavy burden from which we can find no relief. They have cast upon us the spell of the double bind from which there is only the provisional escape of momentarily satisfactory representations. In sum, wherever the storms of historical representation acquire the force of a hurricane, where storms of historiography never come to rest—think of the Renaissance and the French or the Industrial Revolution—we shall find in its eye the silence of a historical experience.[20]

3. Coetzee: From the Moral Double Bind to Experience

I shall now turn to *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons,* a novel by J. M., Coetzee who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. The principal character in the novel is Elizabeth Costello (with some tinkering an anagram of Coetzee by changing the z into an s and two e's into l's). She is an elderly Australian novelist with an international literary reputation, invited to speak at a number of conferences in the United States, South Africa, and Europe. Sometimes she is alone, and sometimes her son—a professor of physics at an American college—is with her. The novel is basically a report of her experiences at these conferences. Much in this novel reminds us of Kafka. To begin with, there is something indisputably Kafkaesque about the conference circuit, where the discrepancy between what one might expect from the intellectual competition of so many intelligent and highly educated persons and the meaningless and hopeless *dialogues des sourds* sadly resulting from it fills the reader with frustration and despair. And the reader wonders why a supremely sensible person—as Elizabeth Costello undoubtedly is—should ever have allowed herself to get involved in it so deeply.

More important, however, is that the novel's last chapter clearly is a subtle paraphrase of Kafka's "Before the Law." In this final chapter Elizabeth

20. For an elaboration of this metaphor, see my *Sublime Historical Experience;* chapter 8, section 8.

Costello arrives in a sleepy little town—and we are not told where she came from or why she came there at all. Having descended from the bus that has brought her, she makes her way to a gate where a uniformed man stands drowsily on guard, and she asks the guard whether this is the gate she is supposed to pass through. The guard refers her to a little lodge, where she discovers the gatekeeper. All this accurately reflects the beginning of the Kafka parable. Moreover, the chapter is entitled "At the Gate," and throughout it there are unmistakable references to "Before the Law."[21]

But the differences are of no less importance. Kafka's man from the country spends his whole life before his gate, and the story ends with his death, whereas it only gradually becomes clear that Elizabeth Costello finds herself in some indefinite limbo between life and death or, as she puts it herself, in a kind of friendly "purgatory." Moreover, as befits someone on the threshold between life and death, she finds herself compelled to give an account, or a moral justification of her life *as a writer.* Obviously, this does not have its analogue in the Kafka parable; we perceive the mind of the man from the country only from the outside, as it were, and never really penetrate into what goes on in it.[22] But in Coetzee's variant the gatekeeper hands Elizabeth a form and tells her that she will be allowed to pass through the gate only after having stated in this form what her "beliefs" are. This profoundly puzzles her, and initially she does not understand exactly how she is expected to deal with it—only gradually does it dawn on her that this demand to state her beliefs effectively questions all of her life as a writer. So the chapter is essentially an account of her struggle with the question and of how her attempt to deal with it shifts from an investigation of what her moral beliefs *as a writer* are to a reflection on what a belief itself is.

After having recovered from her initial perplexity and having tried in vain to escape from the ordeal of having to state her beliefs—for this is how she experiences it—she finally settles for a compromise between her unwilling-

21. For example, when Elizabeth Costello—just like the man from the country in the Kafka parable—is allowed to cast a glance at what lies beyond the gate, she asks herself: "will this be the point where he [i.e. the gatekeeper (F. A.)] tells her the gate is meant for her and her alone, and moreover that she is destined never to pass through? Should she remind him, let him know that she knows the score?" See J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello, Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), 196. Further references to this book will be given in the text itself.

22. though some commentators on the Kafka parable have argued that the parable's story is the externalization of a drama enacted in somebody's inner self. And that the parable is about existential or moral paralysis: for the man from the country ought to have had the courage to (try to) push aside the gatekeeper and pass through the gate in order to get access to the Law. We can overcome the double bind only by forcing our way through it; that is, by denying somehow its existence.

ness to state her beliefs and the obligation to do so. She describes herself as "a secretary of the invisible":

> I am a secretary of the invisible, one of the many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right. (199) A good secretary has no beliefs. It is inappropriate to the function. A secretary should merely be in readiness, waiting for the call. (200) It is not my profession to believe, just to write. Not my business. I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said. (194) I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes, according to my needs. (195)

Self-evidently, this is in agreement with the requirement of objectivity that both the historian and the (realist) novelist are traditionally expected to satisfy. The historian and the novelist should never allow their beliefs—their moral and political values—to interfere with their account of the world.

But this quasi-Rankean modesty of being merely the secretary of what one writes about[23] will involve Elizabeth Costello no less in a double bind than was the case with the man from the country—though, admittedly, her double bind is moral rather than existential and as such reminiscent of the one we encountered in the introduction. This becomes clear when a tribunal of judges discusses Elizabeth Costello's statement of her beliefs. One of the judges then points out that being a mere secretary of the invisible must, in the end, result in an incapacity to judge between the murderer and his victim. He says to Elizabeth Costello,

> [Y]ou do not judge between the murderer and his victim? Is that what it is to be a secretary: to write down whatever you are told? To be bankrupt of conscience?
>
> She is cornered, she knows. (204)

Coetzee tacitly refers here to his argument in the previous chapter—and for a correct grasp of the exchange between Elizabeth Costello and the judge a few words need to be said about this. In this previous chapter Elizabeth

23. "ich wünschte mein Selbst gleichsam auszulöschen, und nur die Dinge reden, die mächtigen Kräfte erscheinen zu lassen, die im Laufe der Jahrhunderte mit und durch einander entsprungen und erstarkt, nunmehr gegen einander aufstanden und in einem Kampf geriethen (. . .)." See L. von Ranke, Englische Geschichte. Vornehmlich im siebzehnten Jahrhundert. Zweiter Band, in id., *Sämmtliche Werke. Fünfzehnter Band* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1870), 103.

Costello has been invited to speak at a conference in Amsterdam on "The Problem of Evil." The main target in her lecture is a novel by Paul West entitled *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg,*[24] in which a description is given, down to the last grisly and sickening details, of the execution of those who had conspired in July 1944 against Hitler (Stauffenberg himself and some of the main conspirators were executed on the spot in the evening of July 20, but a few hundred others—with or without a trial—were killed during the ensuing months). Needless to say, this book is, for Coetzee, a mere *pars pro toto* for this whole industry of books written over the last fifteen to twenty years about the Holocaust and about how we should relate to it. And is there not an immoral tactlessness in all this writing and theorizing about the Holocaust (all these theorists exploiting the sufferings of the Jews in order to make their own little theoretical point)? We may therefore admire Coetzee's tact when he moves away from the Jews to the conspirators against Hitler in his own argument.

Indeed, in her lecture Elizabeth Costello wants to explain why she feels a deep moral revulsion about both this book and its author (so we can imagine her discomfiture when she discovers that Paul West himself is also present at the conference!). Her main argument against the book and its author is that one cannot "wander as deep as Paul West does into the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed. Have we considered that the explorer enticed into that forest may come out not better and stronger for the experience but worse?" (161). And the same is true, of course, for the readers of novels like Paul West's. She finds it difficult to explain her moral revulsion about the book until she hits on the "talismanic" word "obscene": books like that of Paul West, about the horrors of the Holocaust, are obscene. The word strikes her as the right one, because "she chooses to believe that *obscene* means *off-stage.* To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain off-stage. Paul West has written an obscene book, he has shown what ought not to be shown" (168). So apparently the idea is that writing about things like the Holocaust has the immoral effect of expanding the stage of moral depravity by adding to a dimension that was hitherto still offstage. We substantially enlarge the universe of immorality by our discussions of the Holocaust. And this is why Elizabeth Costello experiences, when reading West's book, "the brush of Satan's hot, leathery wings" (178).[25]

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24. West, P., *The very rich hours of Count von Stauffenberg,* New York 1980.

25. In his forthcoming book Dominick LaCapra offers a penetrating analysis of Costello's comments on West's novel: "(I)n responding to this criticism, (the historical) Paul West (who, unlike

We can now measure the depth of the moral impasse in which Elizabeth has maneuvered herself in her discussion with her judge. We can describe her dilemma as follows: the novelist (or the historian) seeing him or herself as a secretary of the invisible can choose to write or not to write about things like the Holocaust. The decision not to do so clearly presupposes a *moral* premise stating that one ought to avoid the pitfalls of a book like Paul West's. But the embrace of moral premises is precisely what a secretary of the invisible such as Elizabeth Costello wants to avoid. Moreover (though Coetzee does not mention this), the decision to ignore the Holocaust and to act as if it had not happened is a moral infamy as well. On the other hand, the decision to write about it will enmesh you in the moral obscenities of Paul West. So in the first place it will be impossible to modestly remain a mere secretary of the invisible; the more Elizabeth Costello wishes to expel any moral beliefs, the stronger they will return. In the second place—and worse still—there is no morally honorable way of writing about the Holocaust, since all writing about it will enlarge our universe of moral depravity (as Elizabeth Costello argues)—and, by doing so, make us into less moral people than we were. We may hope to be more on the alert, but in any case we will be more morally blunted than we had been before. In sum, events like the Holocaust present the secretary of the invisible with (again) a double bind: on the one hand such events require the secretary of the invisible to deal *nolens, volens* with the moral problem of how to write about them, whereas on the other, no satisfactory solution to this moral problem can be found. Small wonder, then, that Elizabeth Costello feels herself cornered in the discussion with her judge!

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his counterpart in Coetzee's novel, does not remain silent) argues for the necessity of a certain kind of rendition if one is to convey an event by 'sympathizing, empathizing with the people who went through it," including perpetrators such as Hitler's executioners. He sees Coetzee not as agreeing with Costello but as making her "a sacrificial animal [. . .] carefully set up to be destroyed" in the novel. West does not explicate what he means by a sympathetic, empathic rendition. But I think his view of Costello as Coetzee's 'sacrificial animal" is problematic at best. One might rather argue that the relation of the Coetzee-narrator to Costello varies both from chapter to chapter and at times within chapters, with different degrees of critical, at times ironic distance, and proximity—proximity in terms of empathy or compassion that cannot be seen as tantamount to identification. [. . .] But I think the implication of Coetzee's figuration of Costello in this chapter is that, while her views on the rendition of radical evil in literature are not to be easily dismissed, her reading of West's novel is largely if not entirely projective (one way to read Costello's own reference to her making the book her own "by the madness of [her] reading" [174]) as well as to "an obsession that is hers alone and that he [West who Costello is surprised to find is a participant at the conference and in the audience at her lecture] clearly does not understand" [177]. See LaCapra, "Coetzee, Sebald, and the Narration of Trauma," in his forthcoming *History, Literature, Critical Theory*. I wholly agree with LaCapra's analysis. Of course the question remains whether what Costello projects on West's novel agrees with Coetzee's own reading of the book. In my view the answer can only be affirmative: suppose Coetzee had read West's novel differently, why would he have so viciously attacked it in his own?

Nor do we find her dealing with the issue of her beliefs in a wholly different way in the remainder of the chapter. She now discards all moral beliefs or pathetic declarations such as "I believe in the irrepressible human spirit," or "all humanity is one." Instead, she now reduces her moral beliefs to zero, so to speak. Only very "thin" beliefs may, perhaps, pass through the lasso of the double bind or, perhaps, beliefs somehow repeating the paradoxes of the double bind: "I have beliefs but I do not believe in them. They are not important enough to believe in. My heart is not in them. My heart and my sense of duty" (200). And this is not a statement of unbelief or of cynicism—for obviously, unbelief and cynicism are quite substantial and arrogant beliefs.

When asked during a second session with her judges what these minimal beliefs amount to, Elizabeth Costello comes up with an amazing story. She starts to talk about a kind of frog she remembers from her childhood in rural Victoria near the river Dulgannon, about how these frogs each year dig their way into the ground in the dry season and how they all come out and start croaking after the torrential autumn rains. And then she concludes:,"[W]hat do I believe? I believe in those little frogs. Where I find myself today, in my old age and perhaps my older age, I am not sure. . . . But the Dulgannon and its mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether I do or not I believe in them. . . . I believe in what does not bother to believe in me . . . She [i.e., Elizabeth] is a creature of belief. What a relief!" (216–218, 222).

The enigma of this weird turn in Elizabeth Costello's struggle with the issue of her beliefs is solved by the book's postscript, which is a fictitious letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Sir Francis Bacon. This letter is, again, a paraphrase of a few crucial passages from the Austrian novelist and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal's (also fictitious) "Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" of 1902. When introducing his readers to Elizabeth Chandos's letter Coetzee quotes from Hofmannsthal's letter the following passage:

> [A]t such moments even a negligible creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree, a cart track winding over a hill, a mossy stone, counts more for me than a night of bliss with the most beautiful and devoted mistress. These dumb and in some cases inanimate creatures press towards me with such fullness, such presence of love, that there is nothing in range of my rapturous eye that does not have life. It is as if everything, everything that exists, everything I can recall, everything my confused thinking touches on, means something. (226)

Hofmannsthal wrote this letter while going through what one might call his "language crisis"—the terrible experience in which a writer or poet realizes

that language is hopelessly unfit for its task, that it cannot connect us to the world or convey meaning. In order to understand what Hofmannsthal had in mind, think of clouds or of a painting. If you look at these from a certain distance, you can discern the cloud's contours or what's on the painting. But if you move too close, the cloud dissolves into thin vapor and the painting into a myriad of meaningless little strokes of paint. So it is with words and meaning: they can perform their task only as long as we use them, so to speak, thoughtlessly and unreflectingly. For as soon as we start to scrutinize them, to stare intensively at our linguistic instruments (to paraphrase Wittgenstein, another Viennese!),[26] they will begin to lose their tensile force—and what are language and meaning other than the tensile force to pull and keep together the things that are named by them? Words and meaning will then dissolve into meaninglessness, just as clouds and what's on a painting will lose their contours if scrutinized from too nearby. And with the possible exception of the philosopher, nobody can be expected to be more prone to this language crisis than the poet and the novelist, for do we not admire them for being able to do things with words that nobody else is capable of? How could they succeed in this without staring at words and their meaning and without thus continuously risking seeing them dissolve into thin air?

But the most amazing part in Hofmannsthal's Chandos letter is his explanation of what is given to him in return for this loss of language and meaning. He writes that he can now directly *experience* reality, the world, free from the webs of meaning that language has sown around the objects it contains. The world has now thrown off the mask that language has put on it—he now encounters the world as denuded from the clothes in which language has wrapped it. This is what he experiences as a "revelation"—in the true and etymological sense of that word. And this revelation will—as we might expect—preferably be effected by precisely those aspects of the world considered wholly meaning*less* under the dispensation of meaning and language. For then the opposition will be strongest between our trusted world of meaning and what the world is like when the mask of language has momentarily been removed.

We are now in a position to see what Elizabeth Costello must have had in mind in saying that she "believed" in these frogs of the Dulgannon River. Obviously, these frogs are her variant of Hofmannsthal's dog, rat, beetle,

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26. "[N]aming appears as a queer connexion of a word with an object.—And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word "this" innumerable times." L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), section 38.

stunted apple tree, etc. (and what these animals and plants exemplify is nature's intrinsic meaninglessness, its "just being there"). And the way that led her there was the one that Lord Chandos followed. For was she not forced to stare at her beliefs and at her deepest moral convictions *as a writer* in just the same way that Lord Chandos (or Hofmannsthal) found himself compelled to stare at meaning and language—and to be paralyzed by this just like him? Just as meaning was pushed out of language by the Kafka parable by the double binds of interpretation, just as meaning evaporated in Lord Chandos's (and Hofmannsthal's own) language crisis, so did the double binds of moral belief compel Elizabeth Costello to abandon the whole set of traditional moral meanings and beliefs she had learned to associate with writing.

But in exchange for the loss of interpretative meaning (Kafka), existential meaning (Hofmannsthal), and moral meaning (Coetzee and his alias, Elizabeth Costello), the revelations of direct experience can be expected.[27]

4. Conclusion: Coetzee and Spinoza

But what is revealed by experience, as discussed above? Can we say anything about this? Coetzee does not explicitly deal with this question. Nevertheless, he gives us a clear and unambiguous hint. On the very last page of the novel Elizabeth Costello returns again to the gate, her gate:

> [S]he has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram DOG-GOD. *Too literary,* she thinks again. A curse on literature! (225)

So this dog, transfigured into the sublime in the first sentence of the Hofmannsthal quote, as we may recall, stands here for God—in a certain sense at least. Such is clearly the suggestion of the final lines of the novel. Obviously the pantheism implied by this vision cannot fail to remind us of Spinoza.[28]

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27. Elsewhere I already discussed some of the implications of Hofmannsthal's Chandos letter for the historical theorist. See my *Historical Representation,* 140–144.

28. I would not wish to imply that Spinoza was a pantheist in the strict sense of the word; he does not argue for a simple and unqualified identification of God and the world. Pan*en*theism would be a better term.

Moreover, Costello/Coetzee explicitly states that Hölderlin is the only writer for whom she/he can still always find time in old age (188). And there certainly never was a more Spinozist poet than Hölderlin.[29] Hence what link could there be between the conception of experience with which *Elizabeth Costello* ends and Spinoza's philosophical system, as expounded in his *Ethics,* posthumously published in 1677?

This is, of course, not the place to embark on a lengthy exposition of the details of the Spinozist system. So I restrict myself to a few main points. In his *Ethics* Spinoza equates the notions of God, substance, and nature: there is one substance, this substance is God, and it comprises all of nature (*Deus sive natura*). This one substance has an infinity of attributes, two of which are accessible to us—what Descartes had in mind with thought and extension. The substance, or God, is the cause both of itself and of all the finite individual things in nature, such as human beings, which Spinoza refers to as *modi.* Now, in a strictly deductive system like Spinoza's, all "movement," to put it metaphorically, goes from God down to the finite *modi*—with the implication that, normally speaking, there would be no way back from the finite *modi* to God. For that would be wholly at odds with the hierarchical (causal) order between the one substance, or God, and the finite *modi.* And, generally speaking, this is how it is in the Spinozist system. However, if we focus on what one might call Spinoza's epistemology, there is an exception to this rule. For Spinoza there are three ways of knowing. The first two are imagination and knowledge according to reason. Imagination is knowledge by association and as such is subject to the errors of association. (It is of interest, in the context of this chapter, to add that for Spinoza language is based on the association of sounds and perceptions and thus a rich source of these errors of association. Language is therefore always to be looked at with the greatest distrust.) Knowledge according to reason succeeds in overcoming the confusions of the imagination, but it is essentially general and cannot give us adequate knowledge of individuals, such as God or the finite *modi.*

But there is a third and far more fundamental way of knowing that Spinoza calls "intuitive knowledge," since this knowledge does not rely on rational inference or deduction but is a matter of a seeing *uno intuito,* "in one glance."[30] And this intuitive knowledge has the remarkable capacity to get

29. See M. Wegenast, *Hölderlin's Spinoza-Rezeption und ihre Bedeutung für die Konzeption des "Hyperion,"* Tübingen 1990.

30. "praeter haec duo cognitionis genera datur, ut in sequentibus ostandam, aliud tertium, quod scientiam intuitivam vocabimus." And he then goes on to say that we take in the insights of the 'scientia intuitiva" in "one glance" in the same way that we will infer "uno intuitu" from the number

us back from the finite *modi* to God and to permit us to understand *things in their relation to God.* As Genevieve Lloyd puts it,

> [T]he content of Spinoza's intuitive knowledge is nothing but the general truth, grasped by reason in the early sections of the *Ethics:* that all our bodily affections depend on God or substance. But intuitive knowledge has an immediacy and power which reason lacks. In Part One of the *Ethics,* we were supposed to grasp the true status of finite modes as an abstract principle, derived from axioms and definitions. We now see this fundamental truth inform our ordinary experience, so that we come to understand ourselves and our affects *in relation to the idea of God.*[31]

Needless to say, this comes surprisingly close to Elizabeth Costello's DOG + GOD experience and the kind of pantheistic revelations suggested by it, and it gives extra support to my conjecture of Costello/Coetzee's Spinozism.[32]

So we may ask, finally, what can the writer, whether novelist or historian, learn from Spinoza as *a writer?* What kind of Spinozist ethics can be gleaned from all this for the novelist and the historian? At this stage of my argument, a large part of this question has in fact already been answered. For we have seen, first, that the paradoxes and double binds of textual meaning (the Kafka parable) and moral meaning (*Elizabeth Costello*) point in the direction of the notion of *experience.* Next, following Coetzee's cues, we have related experience, as meant here, to Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva.* For this is what experience gives access to. But this intuitive knowledge gained by experience is not knowledge in the ordinary sense of the word. It does not give the novelist any cognitive information about the world that we are living in. Nor does it provide the historian with knowledge about the past. Recall, in this context, that Spinoza's masterwork is entitled *Ethics,* though contrary to what the title suggests, we will not find in it a deduction of moral imperatives or prescriptions for how to act. This is not what Spinoza was interested in. Moreover, such moral imperatives would not have been of any help to Elizabeth Costello or to the historian. They would only have added further to their perplexities and made them the victims of ever more textual and moral double binds.

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pairs 1 and 2, 2 and 4 etc., that 3 must go together with the number 6. I hasten to add that we should not conclude from Spinoza's example that *scientia intuitiva* gives us what we understand nowadays by apriori knowledge (it is a knowledge of particulars). B. de Spinoza, *Ethica. Pars secunda;* Propositio XL, Scholium II.

31. G. Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 113

32. In a personal letter to me Coetzee confirmed his sympathies for Spinoza's thought.

But Spinoza can be of help to both the novelist and the historian by suggesting that the notion of experience makes sense and that we should take it seriously. And the phrase "taking seriously" is surely appropriate here, for Spinoza is arguably the most serious of all great philosophers (and I would not hesitate to add that Coetzee undoubtedly is the most serious of all contemporary novelists). All that we say and do, how we live—all these "affects" are to be seen in their relationship to the idea of God: GOD-DOG, to use Coetzee's example. Could one be more serious? But this is not the seriousness of a momentous moral decision; it is the seriousness of the requirement to experience the world as a necessity from which there is no escape. We must learn to see the world as necessary, as devoid of mere contingency.[33] If we have moral obligations, this is the one to begin with. It is the obligation to be serious, in the sense of requiring us to identify ourselves with the Spinozist parallelism of the cognitive and the ontological order of the world so that all that we think and do cannot be belied by any other part or aspect of the world. If we succeed in doing this, each link, such as Elizabeth Costello's DOG-GOD link, should be able to support no less than the weight of the whole universe. This is probably what Elizabeth Costello had in mind when writing at the end of her story, "*Fidelities.* Now that she has brought it out, she recognizes it as the word on which all hinges" (224). "Fidelities" is used here not in the merely cognitive sense of being true to fact but in the ontological sense of being reliable, or trustworthy, as we may trust the solidity of a bridge or a tower. A novel or book on history is not merely a message that can be true or false; it also is a thing, and as such it participates in the seriousness of things and of the presence of God in all that exists.

But last, Spinoza also has a special message for the historian. As we have seen, his *Ethics* culminates in the notion of this *scientia intuitiva*—and in the intellectual love of God (*amor intellectualis Dei*) that both precedes and follows from our intuitive grasp of the nature of God, or of the substance. And since God, or the substance, comprises everything, all of nature and the world from the beginning to eternity, this *scientia intuitiva* compels us to look at the world from the perspective of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). It makes us recognize the horizon of an eternal Being within which all historical becoming is enclosed. It makes us acknowledge that Goethe, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche were right in saying that there is not only something "unhistorical" *preceding* all history—obviously nature—but also something unhistorical lying *beyond*

33. "de natura Rationis non est res, ut contingentes; sed, ut necessarias, contemplari." B. De Spinoza, *Ethica. Pars Secunda;* Propositio XLIV.

all history to which we can get access only after having historicized everything that can be historicized. This is the unhistorical that Burckhardt was after in his *Weltgeschichliche Betrachtungen*—unchanging patterns in history that the historian may discern in the past after having said everything about the past he could possibly say. It is the unhistorical about which Nietzsche had said, "[S]uprahistorical I call those powers, leading us away from all Becoming to what grants to Being the character of the eternal and of sameness of meaning, to art and religion."[34] Beyond history is a domain of an eternal sameness of meaning of which we may get a glimpse in the experience of the work of art when all the ages separating us (as historical subjects) from the past (as object) have suddenly vanished. Subject and object, present and past have then temporarily been united in the Spinozist One Substance. Art was, therefore, Nietzsche's *scientia intuitiva,* so to speak, enabling us to become one with the past, where, paradoxically, the past undoes itself by always sundering itself from the present.[35] Nietzsche (and Burckhardt) embrace here the perspective in which Spinoza's whole philosophical effort culminated—and about which Bertuschat wrote the deeply moving words with which I conclude this chapter:

> The eternity of the mind is such in its being in time, that it cannot be made comprehensible in terms of the experience of the temporal. Spinoza therefore does not explain how the human being can move on from temporal experience to the experience of the eternal by means of this *scientia intuitiva;* he only claims that *if* the human individual has once achieved the experience of the eternal, he will come to a new self-understanding enabling him—untainted by his own temporality—to see all things *sub specia aeternitatis* and to find in himself this perspective confirmed.[36]

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34. ""überhistorisch" nenne ich die Mächte, die den Blick von dem Werden ablenken, hin zu dem, was dem Dasein den Charakter des Ewigen und Gleichbedeutenden gibt, zu *Kunst* und *Religion.*" F. Nietzsche, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben, in id., *Friedrich Nietzsche. Werke I* (Munich, Ullstein Materialien, 1983), 281.

35. for a further discussion of this leap from the historical into the supra-historical, see my *Sublime Historical Experience;* chapters 4, 8 and the Epilogue.

36. "die Ewigkeit des Geistes ist eine solche in dessen Zeitlichkeit, die aus Erfahrungen des zeitlichen aber nicht verständlich gemacht werden kann. Spinoza legt deshalb auch nicht dar, wie der Mensch aus seinen zeitlichen Erfahrungen zu einer Erfahrung des Ewigen im intuitiven Erkennen gelangen kann, sonder nur, dass der Mench, wenn er sie einmal erlangt hat, zu einem neuen Selbstverständnis gelange, das ihn, unberührt von der Zeitlichkeit, fortfahren lässt, die Dinge sub specie aeternitatis zu betrachten und somit die Betrachtungsweise von sich aus zu bekräftigen." W. Bertuschat, *Baruch de Spinoza* (Munich, Verlag C.H. Beck, 1996), 141.

We have then come full circle to Spinoza's notion of the One Substance, as discussed in chapter 1, of which both subject and object are mere emanations or manifestations. The problem of the subjectivity and the objectivity of the historian has then lost all its former clarity and self-evidence. Subject and object have then lost their formerly clear contours, and both dissolve in the Spinozist One Substance of History. But this does not in any way diminish the moral duties of the historian when informing his readers about our collective past. However, what these moral duties are no one should ever try to define; they owe their mandatory force precisely to the impossibility to fix them once and for all. Every historian should struggle with this challenge and be continuously aware that he no longer has the right to speak as soon as this struggle seems to have come to an end. You can approximate objectivity only as long as you sincerely despair of approximating it. This is that double bind of objectivity that Elisabeth Costello discovered in her friendly purgatory.

CHAPTER 12

Politics

1. Introduction

Throughout this book my compass has been the claim put forward in chapter 3 that representation/aesthetics is prior to interpretation/hermeneutics and that it is better to investigate the writing of history from the perspective of representation than from that of interpretation. Interpretation is something one does with texts that already exist, and the phrase "interpreting *the past*" can therefore never be more than a deconstructivist metaphor. So when the linguistic (or, rather, rhetorical) turn in contemporary philosophy of history put a premium on interpretation at the expense of representation, the result was what one might call an "etherealization" of the past. The text was now believed to precede the past, whereas the past itself could never be more than a spin-off from the text. The past itself now became something abstract, an entity emanating from the text and having no substance of itself.

Trying to undo this etherealization of the past will also confront us anew with the basic and straightforward question of what the past actually *is*. What is it made of? What is the "substance" of most of history (if it is not "textual")? It might be a good idea to have a more or less well-considered conception of this, since this might help us resist the temptation to dissolve the past again in the mists of text and interpretation. We would be well advised to have some notion of where this extratextual reality that we call

the past (preceding what we say about it) is primarily to be found, of where it possesses its most obvious and securest anchors—anchors that no present or future Derrida will be able to pull free from the bottom of the sea again, however strong the winds of interpretation may blow. To be sure, from there we may embrace each abstraction that might capture our fascination, but let's agree with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi that the game of abstraction is always a dangerous game[1]—unless you're doing mathematics, and even there you can go astray as we all know since Gödel. So we should never forget to ask ourselves at the end of the day how we got there and what in the morning had been our point of departure before we took off on the wings of abstraction.

This, then, brings me to the theme of political history and the claim I defend below that in whatever way one looks at the matter, political history is the basis and condition of all other variants of historical writing, including socioeconomic history, cultural history, and intellectual history. So Ranke and his fellow historicists were right, once again, in believing that history is basically the history of past politics—a belief that the critics always considered historicism's main sin.[2] And I hasten to add that this is by no means an attempt to belittle the significance and legitimacy of these other variants! Nor would such a reactionary claim in any way follow from my argument here. Let us warmly welcome these later variants!

2. Political History Bashing

It's an old and venerable tradition in history to toll the funeral bell for political history. Estienne Pasquier did so in the sixteenth century in his fascinating *Les recherches de la France,* as did Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century, Voltaire in the eighteenth with his *Essai sur les Moeurs,* Marx and Lamprecht in the nineteenth, and Braudel and countless others in the twentieth. Political history was invariably condemned as outmoded, intellectually barren, primitive drum-and-trumpet history, naive, superficial, ideologically tainted; it was viewed as a handmaiden to the existing powers, giving no information about what truly matters in the past. In short, it was regarded as the very epitome of all that the sensible, modern, and, above all, scientific historian should avoid. But each time political history was consigned to the garbage heap of histori-

1. This is an argument I made in my "Jacobi: Realist, Romanticist, and Beacon for our Time," *Common Knowledge* 14 (Spring 2008): 221–244.

2. See, for example, Georg Iggers's still authoritative study of historicism, *The German Idea of History* (Middletown, CT, 1968).

cal writing, nobody seemed to realize that doing this was a topos almost as old as historical writing itself.

Perhaps one could not think of a more striking example of political history bashing than Tolstoy's in *War and Peace* (1865–1869). At the end of that book Tolstoy added two epilogues, of which the second one is an essay more than fifty pages long in which he discusses the proper tasks of the historian as well as the sins and shortcomings of all previous historical writing in general and that of nineteenth-century historians especially. As Runia demonstrated in his brilliant book on Tolstoy—*De Pathologie van de Veldslag*—the battlefield was Tolstoy's model for all of history.[3] What so much struck him about battles was that although commanding generals plan battles as carefully as they can, absolutely nothing comes of all these detailed and deeply pondered plans, and thus the term "battle" is in practice the exact equivalent of "chaos." Nowhere in the social and public domain is this discrepancy between planning and outcome so huge and perplexing, and nowhere does it have such far-reaching consequences. Battles are impossible to plan; they are the disordered, confused, and utterly chaotic clashing of two masses of soldiers, finally gaining some contours that will only later crystallize in some unfathomable way in history's verdict about who won and who lost the battle. This is the verdict that is at stake in the battle of the historians—and that often seems to follow exactly the same logic as the real battle itself, as if it were a kind of parallel process in the sense that the historian's account of the past is a repetition of it rather than a representation.[4]

When presenting this analysis of the battlefield as a metaphor for much of history, Tolstoy wanted to attack historians such as Adolphe Thiers, who presents the past as the outcome of careful planning and decision making by kings, statesmen, and generals[5] (which did not prevent Tolstoy from ruthlessly plundering these works in writing *War and Peace*). In short, why did Napoleon succeed in his effort to conquer all of continental Europe in the first decade of the nineteenth century? Answer: because of his supreme military and diplomatic genius.

This conception of historical writing provoked Tolstoy's ire and contempt. So he emphasized again and again that in history there simply is no one in the driver's seat (or so many at one and the same time that they drive each other

3. E. H. Runia, *De pathologie van de veldslag* (Amsterdam, 1995), unfortunately still awaiting its translation into English.

4. See E. Runia, "'Forget about It': 'Parallel Processing' in the Srebrenica Report," *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004): 295–321.

5. See A. Thiers, *Histoire du Consulat* (Paris, 1883); A. Thiers, *Histoire de l'Empire,* 4 vols. (Paris, 1883–88).

out, with the same result); it is the perennial naïveté of political historians to think that there is and to project an image on the past where everything is believed to be not only the result of human action but also of human design (to paraphrase Adam Ferguson).[6] For only on the basis of that assumption does it make any sense to carefully register and analyze the doings of kings, statesmen, generals, and their consequences. So far, so good, and I feel no urge to protest.

But then Tolstoy goes on to say that the battle best exemplifies the inexorable truth that human planning and decision making never succeed in penetrating into the very substance of history. The plans and strategies of generals and their staffs, however carefully worked and thought out, will never go deeper than the mere surface of things and give form and structure to the actual course of the battle. Greater forces than the flimsy intentions and actions of a pretentious statesman general are at work there. "Man denkt zu schieben, aber man wird geschoben," as the German proverb goes.

And now it comes: exactly this, according to Tolstoy, explains why Field Marshal Kutuzov[7] could defeat (or rather outwit) Napoleon. Kutuzov, in agreement with his conviction that in military affairs nothing mattered but "time and patience," always avoided having a battle with Napoleon's army, apart from Borodino in 1812.[8] For he "knew"—as Tolstoy argued—that planning and decision making could result only in the counterproductive confusion and postponement of the workings of some massive power active in political and military reality. So the sensible politician or the general should begin by humbly submitting to the workings of these forces,[9] to get in harmony with them—any revolt against them would surely be suicidal!—and then carefully and unpretentiously try to cooperate with them in order to best use them for his own purposes. Kutuzov succeeded in defeating Napoleon by simply and modestly paving the way for the workings of these massive powers, which in the end did all the work for him. This is what Pierre Bezukhov, his fictional counterpart in the domain of daily human life, did when weathering all the painful dramas in his personal life by similarly bowing to what seemed to him to be the inexorable dictates of fate—thus happily

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6. See chapter 2, note 19.

7. Who was married to a countess Tolstoy, by the way.

8. One of the funniest passages in *War and Peace* is Tolstoy's description of how this provoked Napoleon into writing indignant letters to Czar Alexander I in St. Petersburg angrily complaining that this was no decent way to fight a war.

9. Tolstoy viewed this as some vast subterranean movement first from west to east (Napoleon's rise to power) and then back again from east to west (his fall), much like the systole and the diastole of some huge geopolitical organism. One is reminded of Molière's quip: Why does opium make us feel sleepy? Answer: because it has a soporific effect. So it is with the causal powers of Tolstoi's vast movements.

ending up with lovely Natasha instead of the haughty adulteress Helena. *Ne bougez pas,* as the French put it.

Now, all this is brilliant, fascinating, and as every reader of *War and Peace* will agree, even profoundly moving. Nevertheless, after we have been overwhelmed by the sheer power of Tolstoy's epic, by the vastness of his canvas and the number of people depicted in it (some five hundred), and by the incisiveness of his critique of Thiers et alia, some doubts will begin to announce themselves. In the first place, it cannot be denied that Napoleon changed the political face of Europe in a mere ten years in a more lasting and decisive way than any other European ruler since the days of Charlemagne, and that he had succeeded in doing this by somehow always winning his battles until that fateful day at Borodino, on September 6, 1812. To explain this by the intervention of some vast, impersonal force is undoubtedly an explanation of *obscurum per obscurius* at the very least, and it seems quixotic to deny that Napoleon's rare talent as a military commander must have played a role here as well. Second, and more important, even in Tolstoy's own terms, it is up to the statesman or general whether he will allow himself to be open to the silent and secret songs of these massive powers. Had Kutuzov been more like the unlucky and cleverly calculating Austrian general Weirother, who lost Austerlitz to Napoleon, history would have taken a different course (again, assuming Tolstoy's own argument to be correct).

Hence, if statesmen or generals are not willing to lend their ears to the songs of these suprahuman forces, they may prove to be not so powerful at all (again, to continue the logic of Tolstoy's own argument). And this is something that the statesman or general must decide on—so that puts him back again in the driver's seat that Tolstoy had so vehemently denied to him. Therefore, we will have to welcome the historian who tells us why the general in question was willing, or not, to listen these songs. And in this way we come back full circle to the old argument that politics, political planning and decision making, political thought, etc. can be and often are decisive for humanity's fate. So, again, political history truly matters, even if we were to grant to Tolstoy all his unsubstantiated speculations about these massive supra-suprahuman forces and their workings.[10]

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10. Moreover, if Runia is right in saying that Fabrice del Dongo's wanderings over the battlefield—as famously described by Stendhal at the beginning of his *La Chartreuse de Parme*—were Tolstoy's model for the phenomenon of the battle (and so for political history in general), it is not hard to explain that something had to go wrong in his argument. For it would certainly be most misleading to equate the perspective that one subaltern officer may have of the battle he is fighting in with that of the commanders in chief. See Runia, *De pathologie*, 36, 27.

3. Hegel on Political History

So the general picture is that each time political history came under attack, it arose later like a phoenix from its ashes and always stronger than before. There are some more or less obvious explanations for the remarkable resilience of political history. In the first place, wherever you look on the globe and wherever historical writing came into being, it never began as economic history, social history, or cultural history. The memorable events of the past were always primarily discovered in the great deeds of heroes, kings, and soldiers and in the victories they gained over their powerful enemies. Think of how Homer sang the feats of Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and many others, many centuries before the days of Herodotus and Thucydides. This is where history emerges from myth and legend and where *political history* is the link between myth and legend on the one hand and all of historical writing on the other—shown in chapter 9 to give us the origins of all historical awareness. Political history is prototypical of all history. There is something inevitable and supremely self-evident about political history that all its later competitors lack. One may well surmise, therefore, that all these later competitors presuppose, in one way or other, a minimal acquaintance with the basic data of political history.

This brings me to a second consideration. Take Braudel's *Méditerranée,* and then remove from your mind literally *all* that you know about the political history of sixteenth-century Europe: all you know about its states, nations, kings, and political traditions and about feudalism, the emergence of absolutism, legal systems, etc. And do all this so thoroughly and consistently that, as far you know, sixteenth-century Europe might well be politically equivalent to pharaonic Egypt or imperial China. And then start reading Braudel's *Méditerranée* again. Reading the book will then give you much the same experience as if you were driving your car through an impenetrable mist that restricts your view to a mere ten yards or so. You will no longer be able to make any sense of the book: it will seem to lack focus and subject—as Braudel himself must have surmised when he gave it a title that was clearly at odds with his own program—*La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II.* Just leave out "Philippe II"—and the title becomes an unfathomable enigma.

In opposition to these attempts to get rid of political history, reiterated over and over again in the last five centuries, Hegel considers the the state to be the natural and self-evident topic of all historical writing. His argument is as follows:

> Only the state provides us with a content that is not only appropriate for the prose of history but that also codetermines it. A public con-

> sciousness gradually crystallizing and taking on a more or less fixed form in the state requires not only subjective acts of government that are merely fit for the moment but above all commandments, laws, and universally valid determinations; and in this way the state stimulates both the production of and an interest in events that rationally confirm themselves in their results and effects, to which Mnemosyne is compelled to add lasting memory for the benefit of the self-perpetuating purposes of the state's presently existing nature and form.[11]

Hegel's point of departure here is the remarkable fact that in many European languages the word "history" may mean both the past itself (res gestae) and the historical account of the past (*historia rerum gestarum*). And Hegel infers that this semantic ambivalence can be no coincidence and that there must therefore be some deep, hidden wisdom in it. Moreover, if we identify the past itself with Hegel's notion of the objective—objective past reality, so to speak—and the story of the past with that of the subjective—the subject's account of past reality—we shall recognize that this semantic ambivalence is, so to speak, the logical space within which Hegel's own philosophy of history (as expounded in chapter 1) articulates itself. For the reconciliation of the objective mind with the subjective mind in the absolute mind is the overall plot in the metastory told in Hegel's philosophy of history. But self-evidently, one will then be in need of a certain domain on which this reconciliation, *Versöhnung* or *Anerkennung,* can effectively be enacted in the actual course of history. And this domain is that of the state, according to Hegel. As he argued in the passage quoted above, the explanation is that the state's rules, commandments, and laws transcend the demarcation of the domain of both the objective and the subjective, since they subsume in themselves both the objective past (in which they were defined) and the subjective present (in which their persistence in later events is established by the historian).[12] It is indeed a bit like Tolstoy's Kutuzov listening to the hardly audible songs of vast impersonal historical forces and allowing himself to be inspired by their message.

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11. "Aber der Staat erst führt einen Inhalt herbei, der für die Prosa der Geschichte nicht nur geeignet ist, sondern sie mit selbst erzeugt. Statt nur subjektiver, für das Bedürfnis des Augenblicks genügender Befehle des Regierens erfordert ein festwerdendes, zum Staate sich erhebendes Gemeinwesen Gebote, Gesetze, allgemeine und algemein gültige Bestimmungen und erzeugt damit sowohl einen Vortrag als ein Interesse von verständigen, in sich bestimmten und für sich selbst in ihren Resultaten dauernden Taten und Begebenheiten." G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte,* vol. 1, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Hamburg, 1955), 164.

12. The Spinozism of Hegel's argument here will need no elucidation.

This is why Hegel could claim that the state gives us "the prose" of both the *past itself* and the *historian's account of the past* and thus why the state provides us with the perspective and the terminology for the reconciliation of the objective and the subjective. So for Hegel political history is not only where all historical writing *begins* but also the *culmination* of all historical writing.

4. The Origins of Western Historical Writing in the Renaissance

Hegel's more or less casual remark about the state's giving us the prose of history can be further developed, as I am much relieved to say, for it would be worrying if we had to leave matters here. This brings me to Nancy Struever's *The Language of History in the Renaissance* of 1973, a marvelous little book that—in my view—never quite received the attention it deserves. Though the book focuses on the Renaissance, it has a fascinating prologue in antiquity, where Struever defines the matrix determining history's relationship to other disciplines.[13]

According to her, we should conceive of this matrix as a triangle that has philosophy, rhetoric, and history as its three corners. And she begins her story with the struggle between Plato and the rhetorical tradition from Corax of Syracuse to Gorgias, whom Plato fiercely condemned for their alleged skepticism and relativism. Next, she insists on the closeness of Sophism to the rhetorical tradition. More particularly, though the Sophists were looking for wisdom—*sophia* is Greek for wisdom—they never conceived of wisdom in terms of time-transcendent, eternal, and (quasi-)scientific truths; they were not interested in an "ideal sphere of pure reason and perfect justice" but instead in the sphere of "the intermediate and the relative." as Struever puts it. Think of Parmenides' *panta rhei, kai ouden menei* (everything flows, and nothing remains). Essential in their vocabulary were terms like *kairos, to prepon,* and *doxa,* all expressing the idea that the success and appropriateness of all that we think and do are dependent on the quite specific circumstances in which we happen to find ourselves. This is, of course, what is shared by Sophism and rhetoric: the good rhetorician also knows that he must aim at an intensive interaction with his audience. And this also is a matter of the here and now. The rhetorician is well aware that the style of the timelessly true scientific treatise is rhetorically hopeless.

13. N. Struever, *The Language of History during the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1973). Most of what follows is a summary of this brilliant book.

All this provoked Plato's ire: he wanted timeless truths as exemplified by his ideas, expressing truths lying behind the chaotic and confusing manifold of how the world presents itself to us (historically, as one might appropriately add here). Time gives us the realm of the merely contingent and of what is a mere imperfect and impure reflection of the timeless Platonic ideas. "Alles Vergängliche is nur ein Gleichnis" ("everything perishable is merely a resemblance," i.e. of the eternal Platonic ideas), as Goethe deftly summarized all of Plato in just one sentence at the end of *Faust II*. That meant the end of the sophist's and the rhetorician's openness to the contingencies, the ironies, and especially the tragedy of human, historical existence. Recall that with the appearance of Plato on the scene, Greek tragedy (as exemplified by Sophocles and Aeschylus) lost its appeal and interest. Transparency and rationality drove out the inevitably dark and shadowy domain of the past and its tragedies, to which the Greeks had been so peculiarly sensitive before Socrates and Plato. And we may well regret the loss, as did Nietzsche in his essay on the birth of tragedy from the spirit of music, discussed in chapter 8.

So this suggests how the three corners of Struever's triangle are related to each other. There is, then, a tacit alliance between rhetoric and history since both wish to do justice to the demands of time, whereas for the philosopher, as exemplified by Plato, time dependency is the sure sign of illusion and falsity. The philosopher is the model for every search for eternal truths, whether in philosophy itself or in theology or science. And it follows that historical writing is likely to be considered a respectable intellectual pursuit when our trust in philosophy, theology, or science has reached a temporary low; but it will be the humblest of all disciplines when we are confident again that the human mind has access to timeless truths.

A striking illustration is history's fate in the transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. The sixteenth century was one of profound uncertainty and skepticism, mainly because theological truth then met its nemesis in the fatal battle of the two religions, and no alternative had as yet presented itself. History then thrived, and authors such as Kelley and Franklin have rightly spoken of the "protohistoricism" of sixteenth-century historical writing. But then Descartes came along with his indubitable philosophical certainties, with mathematics and science—and that resulted in the premature death of all the promises of sixteenth-century protohistoricism.

But let's now have a somewhat closer look at the historical consciousness of Renaissance humanism. The Renaissance historical consciousness was the outcome of the protracted fight between the realists and the nominalists in

the late Middle Ages.[14] According to the realists there existed a direct and necessary relationship between language and the world, so reality was, in principle, accessible to the language user. Sometimes realism (or "nomenclaturism," as Saussure called it) had a theological foundation. For example, it was argued that God or Adam had given names to the things of the world, with the tacit implication that there should be some divine sanction to the link between language and the world and hence to what we would now call epistemological truth. But more sophisticated arguments were proposed as well. One can well capture this type of argument by considering how chemical terms like H_2O or NaOH relate to the substance that is named by them: we can infer their nature from their very names. Or, to use Goethe once more as philosophy's popularizer, recall how Faust addressed Mephistopheles at their first encounter: "Bei euch, ihr Herrn, kann man das Wesen /Gewöhnlich aus dem Namen lesen, /Wo es sich allzu deutlich weist, /Wenn man euch Fliegengott, Verderber, Lügner heisst" ("With you, gentlemen, one can infer your nature from your name, as it is immediately clear from whether you're called either Lord of the Flies, Destroyer, or Liar").

For the nominalists, on the contrary, the relationship between language and the world was primarily a matter of historical contingency, in the same way that it is from a philosophical perspective a matter of mere contingency that a dog is called *chien* by the French, *Hund* by the Germans, and *canis* by the Romans. No deep truths about the world can be inferred from their names. These are, indeed, mere names, a mere *flatus vocis,* a mere blowing of the voice, and hence the term "nominalism," Several consequences follow from this that are relevant in the present context.

In the first place, if the relationship between language and the world is a historical contingency, it must at least partly be a *human construct.* This

14. We have seen how medieval nominalism cleared the way for the protohistoricism of Renaissance humanists. And we should then recognize that the medieval battle between the realists and the nominalists has its counterpart in the contemporary debate between realism and instrumentalism. According to modern realists, the language of science actually reflects what reality is like, whereas instrumentalists hold that language is merely an "instrument" for finding our way around in the world and therefore no less a conveyor of truth than hammers and screwdrivers are. Instrumentalism and the discussion provoked by it should not be seen as a discussion about the merits of pragmatism—though admittedly there is a certain overlap. At stake, rather, is the issue of ontology and reference. The realist yearns for a correspondence between word and object that the instrumentalist is quite willing to do without. The instrumentalist wishes to avoid as much as possible all ontological commitments. In this way the dispute between the medieval realists and their nominalist opponents can be said to have anticipated an important discussion in contemporary philosophy of language—a discussion, moreover, that has direct consequences for how to conceive philosophically of the historian's language and what it is about.

means that *we,* and not *God,* define the regime of language and the world, and we therefore have every reason to agree with Cusanus when he claims that nominalism is a revolt against God's order. We robbed God here of one of His most unique and precious possessions and thus became, to a certain extent, like Him, or even His equal. Second, if this relationship is a historical contingency, it can and must be explained historically. *So language has a date.* This is a most important insight, for it is what made Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) see what nobody before him had noticed, namely, that the *Donatio Constantini* was written in a corrupted eighth-century medieval Latin and not in that of the Emperor Constantine's time. He concluded that the document was a fake and hence without any political or legal significance (though it must be admitted that the short-lived and maverick tenth-century German Emperor Otto III had already figured this out).

But there still is a third and even more important consequence to be observed. For language's having a date, its being historically contingent made Renaissance humanists aware of its close relationship to rhetoric. Again, Valla is illustrative, especially when arguing that the Greek word *logos* should not be translated into Latin as *ratio* but as *oratio.* For him, *logos* meant the spoken word, uttered under quite specific (historical) circumstances and in order to have performative or "perlocutionary" force, as John Langshaw Austin would have put it.

Language *does* something, and its use may make a big difference to the world. It has a *creative* potential, as the rhetoricians had known since antiquity. The rhetorician knew that with a rhetorically powerful speech one might convince one's audience to adopt a certain political strategy that might—if fate (or rather, the Goddess Fortuna) would react to it just as favorably—change the course of history to a greater or a lesser extent. Renaissance humanists, always quick to strike the right balance between the life of the scholar—the *vita passiva*—and the life of the active statesman—the *vita activa*—thus came to recognize and rejoice in the political power of language. Language, especially rhetorical language, is *politically creative* and powerfully determines what our political realities will be like. Similarly, the historian who wishes to understand the past and how it came into being will have to focus above all on the language of politics. If he fails to do this, he will lose touch with the most powerful and important agent in human history. And finally, this continuity between the language creating our political and social realities on the one hand and the political historian's language on the other automatically makes the historian focus on the dimension and exploits of human freedom and on where the exercise of political freedom may make a difference to the world.

This brings us back to Hegel's claim that the state gives us the prose of history—that is, the vocabulary determining both history's course and how we must account for it. Both Hegel and the Renaissance humanists thus agreed that political history is the heart and natural center of all historical understanding. This is not to say that all history is or ought to be political history, as I emphasized already at the beginning of this chapter. On the contrary, we should rejoice in how economic history, social history, and cultural history have immeasurably deepened and broadened our knowledge of the past. Again, no doubt about that! But that should never make us forget that they are all like ever-widening circles around a fixed and immutable center—and that center is political history.

5. Conclusion

I began this book with the unfashionable claim that the historicism of Ranke and Humboldt is still the best theory of history available, and I have tried to make that argument throughout, although not by reiterating and defending historicism as it gradually evolved in the nineteenth century. Indeed, historicism as defined by its main protagonists from Herder via Ranke and Humboldt to Droysen and Dilthey will no longer satisfy our standards for solid theoretical argument. The romantic and idealist philosophical vocabulary is hopelessly outdated. But if we remove that vocabulary, we will discover underneath the basic truths about the nature of the past itself, how we relate to it, and how we make sense of it in historical writing. I have argued for this claim here by presenting the historicist's case in a more contemporary vocabulary—even though what I said when making use of the vocabulary will often sound peculiar to other users of that vocabulary. But this is precisely where historicism clad in a more fashionable attire may make these others aware of things they had not known existed.

If this is the book's message for both philosophers of history and philosophers of language, this last chapter contains its message for the historian. The message is that the old nineteenth-century historicists were, again, right in holding that politics is history's backbone. The backbone supports a whole body of other aspects of the past—economic, social, cultural, intellectual, and so on—that merit the most elaborate and sustained historical research, but that body will collapse into a hopelessly incoherent collection of *membra disiecta* as soon as the backbone of politics is forgotten, ignored, and regarded with contempt.

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